

**Years Between Stations:  
The Dream of America in Steve Erickson**

by

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**Author's Declaration:**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

**Abstract:**

Steve Erickson is an author so worried about the meaning of his country that his thematic obsessions influence and dictate the form and content of his writing. This project follows his thematic fixations over the course of his oeuvre to date with both the Dream and promise/paradox of America in mind, attending to the manifestation of these worries in his metaphorization of highways, dreamscapes and rock and roll.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction: “I Was Born In America”

*I was born in America. It was somewhere inland. About the time I was eighteen..I saw my first body of water. It was a wide river that ran to my right. I heard later it was an American river, but I knew that was a lie. I knew there was no such thing as American rivers or foreign rivers. Believing such a thing was my first step in the direction of danger. I never believed in American skies either. But it never meant that I did not believe in America.*

– Steve Erickson, *Rubicon Beach*

Of the scant critical commentary available on Steve Erickson, almost every review and/or essay expresses bewilderment at the lack of criticism available on him. Lee Spinks writes that the intensity of Erickson’s vision is matched only by the roaring silence that has greeted his work (Spinks 214), while Brian Evenson convincingly argues that the slim novels Erickson produces every three or four years are not taken seriously by a literary world that expects doorstopper tomes from its Serious Male Authors (n.pag).<sup>1</sup> David Rice takes the long view, agreeing that Erickson “may never get the mass recognition that was promised him, but, from a reader’s perspective, his contribution has been a far less redundant one: he’s carved out territory that he doesn’t have to share” (“Distant Stations” n.pag.). All three writers are baffled that mainstream success continues to elude Erickson, and conclude that he has been unfairly lumped in with postmodernism and is therefore viewed as a mere apprentice of the genre’s more visible practitioners.

The difficulty of categorizing and marketing Erickson’s work might account for his relative obscurity. Because his Los Angeles is an unrecognizable apocalyptic

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<sup>1</sup> “DeLillo has *Underworld*, Pynchon has *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Gass has *The Tunnel*, Coover has *The Public Burning*, Foster Wallace has *Infinite Jest*, Vollmann has *The Royal Family* (among other things)” (Evenson n.pag.) to which one could add Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*, Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, Mossman’s *The Stones of Summer* and even Delany’s *Dhalgren*.

dreamscape, Erickson cannot be called a Los Angeles author in the tradition of John Fante or Charles Bukowski. Nor does he carry the postmodern banner like the ostentatiously wordy David Foster Wallace or the laconic, grumpy Don DeLillo (though, as will be discussed later, he is still lumped in with these authors.) Erickson frequently cherry-picks elements of science fiction, detective fiction and fantasy while resisting their conventions, making him a dilettante at best and blasphemous at worst in the eyes of fans of those genres. His “non-fiction” books of election coverage (*Leap Year* and *American Nomad*) frequently dissolve into the same oneiric wanderings that characterize his fiction, and cannot reliably be called factual. Erickson is fine with this, having expressed delight that he once saw *Leap Year* in the fiction section of a bookstore (Trucks “A Conversation With Steve Erickson” n.pag.). This attests to his adventurous creative spirit but is likely less than encouraging to the marketing departments of his publishers.

There is also the problem of description. Reviewers of Erickson’s work often lament how ridiculous the work sounds when described compared to how strongly it reads. Indeed, Erickson’s books are unapologetically labyrinthine, and some of his novel’s descriptions are so pretentious and vague that one could not blame the casual bookstore browser for rolling his or her eyes and reshelving the book.<sup>2</sup> However, even if these plot summaries were less florid, the texts would not sound any less intimidating. For example, a linear (the word is used loosely here) plot summary of *Arc d’X* takes Lee Spinks several paragraphs, throughout which he acknowledges how hopelessly convoluted everything sounds (Spinks 228). It is no coincidence that Erickson’s most

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<sup>2</sup> Here is the summary from the back cover of *Our Ecstatic Days*: “Out of fear and love, a young single mother commits a desperate act: convinced that the lake means to take her small son from her, she determines to stop it and becomes the lake’s Dominatrix-Oracle, ‘the Queen of the Zed Night’”. It gets worse. The summary concludes by assuring us that the novel “takes place on the forbidden landscape of a defiant heart.”

visible novel to date, *Zeroville*, is a classic rags-to-riches story about a man who moves to Hollywood and becomes a successful film director. The novel is consistently linear, told in the present tense, and was even optioned in 2011 by James Franco (Griffiths “James Franco”). Alas, the option has since expired – even Erickson’s most accessible novel (by a wide margin) is too busy and fantastic to translate to film.

James Franco’s endorsement may not have given Erickson’s career a discernible boost, but neither has Thomas Pynchon’s. While it may seem like Evenson overstates the significance of *Days Between Stations*, Erickson’s debut, arriving armed with a laudatory blurb from Thomas Pynchon,<sup>3</sup> he is correct that such a thing may have coloured the reading public’s perception of Erickson. Readers coming to Erickson for the Pynchonesque, the “exhilarating tautness of a totalizing cosmic vision” (Rice n.pag.), could easily find themselves disappointed by the languid pace and dissociative description. Though Pynchon delights in leaving loose threads flapping at the end of his novels, he still revels in the hyperspecific, micro details that fill-in his macro paranoid vision, and he renders his world aggressively. Erickson prefers to move laterally and gently. Moreover, as Evenson notes, “Erickson is something that Pynchon and DeLillo are not – a true romantic” (n.pag.).

Evenson means that Erickson’s novels demonstrate some of the qualities of romanticism, but Erickson’s novels also occasionally read like Harlequin romances. In *Days Between Stations*, Michel and Lauren fall deeply in love despite having barely spoken to each other. Apparently their passion is borne from some kind of unstated but profound understanding (akin to the kind commonly found in a romance novel).

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<sup>3</sup> After all, Pynchon’s rhapsodic review of his college buddy Richard Farina’s *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* has not rescued the novel from its fate as a dated relic of Sixties counterculture.



Erickson's third novel, *Tours of the Black Clock*, hurtles along at breakneck speed for two hundred pages only to abruptly halt and dissolve into a leisurely side plot about a pair of Viennese dancers honing their craft. As a boy dancer watches the girl he admires dance to the vicious criticism of her instructors, Erickson manages to toss a barb at his own critics: "he hated the way they supposed that the structures they didn't recognize weren't structures at all" (201). While this Viennese passage is technically sound, one can imagine how a reader expecting hyperactive Pynchonesque exposition might be miffed to find him or herself reading tranquil depictions of blossoming teenage love.

It does not help matters that publishers still see fit to reuse the Pynchon blurb on each successive novel, so that Erickson can never shake the comparison.<sup>4</sup> The quote is prominently displayed on the back cover of *Amnesiascope*, a novel released eleven years after the one Pynchon was actually talking about, and the quote again received top billing on the back cover of *Zeroville*, a novel published in 2007. Upon seeing it again on the back of Erickson's most recent effort *These Dreams of You* (2012), one can safely conclude that it will never go away and that Erickson will always labour in the shadow of Thomas Pynchon, the postmodern titan whose work is decidedly dissimilar from his own.

But Pynchon is not Erickson's sole admirer and champion. He has enjoyed praise from other high-profile authors such as William Gibson, Peter Straub (who describes Erickson as an "almost violently individual writer" in *Arc d'X*), Tom Robbins, Jonathan Lethem, and Kathy Acker. While such accolades may have helped sales, they have failed to elevate Erickson's visibility. Looking beyond commerce, Evenson and Rice both conclude that, while Erickson's originality harms him from a sales and marketing

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<sup>4</sup> Although these quotes often must be approved by the author, it is likely that Erickson grudgingly authorizes them because he needs an endorsement from an author of Pynchon's stature.

perspective, his contributions to American letters are invaluable. Though Erickson himself has “seriously considered...that [he] was never as good as [he] hoped or wanted to believe” (*Amnesiascope* 150), Evenson rejects this with the fervor of the fanatic:

It’s not that Erickson isn’t good enough – he’s able to match the best of the young and old postmodernists to either side of him. Instead, it’s that his mode isn’t acceptable: what he does with pop culture and literary genres, what he does with the arrangement of his narratives, what he does with feeling, what he does with the notion of apocalypse, all cut against the current. If Erickson hasn’t had the success he deserves, it is precisely because his voice is decidedly original enough to be out of step. (n.pag.)

When considering Erickson’s obscurity, one must also acknowledge the decline of postmodernism in general and the resulting public desire for a return to the kind of linear narratives cheerfully supplied by the likes of Jeffrey Eugenides and Jonathan Franzen. Most undergraduates in the 2000s (including myself) were introduced to postmodernism through Don LeLillo, whose work is much easier to parse than Pynchon’s, and lesser postmodern figures like William Gaddis and John Barth are falling out of the cannon faster than their books can be read and understood. Moreover, the problem of competing media is more dire than it was in the days when television stations shut down at night, and there has been a backlash, perhaps inevitable, against books whose sentences challenge the limits of comprehension. One would think, then, that Erickson’s sleek, stylishly written novels would be poised to replace the postmodern toe-breakers of yesterday, except for the pesky fact that he is still unfairly lumped in with the “postmodern heap” (Evenson n.pag.).

Evenson argues that Erickson “deserves his own heap,” and there may yet be hope for him to make it. Retroactive recognition has happened before with American writers like John Kennedy Toole and Philip K. Dick, though such recognition often requires them to die before being fully appreciated – a thoroughly American paradox. Appropriately, the meaning of America is the chief thematic concern of Erickson’s work, and his worrying is more pertinent now than it was in 1985, in light of America’s ongoing decline as the world’s sole economic and military superpower and its shift to a more symbolic, cultural empire. One of the aims of this project, then, is to pinpoint Erickson’s location on the roadmap of American literature and consider his larger thematic concerns through a combination of close reading and analysis appropriate to his worries, so that if he does experience a renaissance there will be an abundance of criticism and commentary available to readers wishing to delve deeper.

Steve Erickson is an author so worried about the meaning of his country that his thematic obsessions influence and dictate the form and content of his writing. While he is not the first American author whose overarching concerns manifest themselves prosaically,<sup>5</sup> he is of a more forlorn American era, one in which many Americans no longer believe in the dream their country promises them. “America’s gone,” declared Erickson in a 1987 interview (“Steve Erickson” n.pag.), before launching into a diatribe that predicted many of the totalitarian traits common in America now – the federal government’s surveillance of citizens, the increasing militarization of the police, and politicians who are “hostile to the basic principles of the Bill of Rights” (“Steve

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<sup>5</sup> One might recall the heartless jalopy salesman in Chapter Seven of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, whereupon the novel switches to first-person and adopts the curt, businesslike rhythms of an opportunistic auto dealer, or Part Four of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which the narrative breaks down to reflect the thought patterns of Tyrone Slothrop’s broken mind.

Erickson” n.pag.). As Erickson relates in *Leap Year*, he was audited shortly after this interview hit the newsstands. He initially ignored his friends’ suggestions that the IRS had targeted him, but when he was informed “after eight months of exhaustive investigation” that he owed the United States \$33, he conceded that “[t]he paranoid political fantasies of my friends no longer [seemed] unreasonable” (149).

While money matters – the American Dream has always had to do with prosperity – it also promises something more elusive: happiness. Increasingly, however, Americans are finding that neither material prosperity nor inner fulfillment is within reach (Hanson and White 1; Bartlett and Steele 246). Since the economic crisis of 2008, poll after poll has shown that the majority of the American people no longer believe in the American Dream. People now believe that “the vaunted capitalist system is rigged against them in favor of the wealthy” (“Every Moment I’m Awake” n.pag.). Erickson has been insisting since the 1980s that the American Dream is actually the Dream of America, potent but intangible, and his prescience has been vindicated. Once upon a time, “[n]ot everyone in the middle class who pursued the American dream expected to get rich. But there was a bedrock sense of optimism” (Bartlett and Steele 245). Erickson agrees with this, but believes that whereas, “[i]n the past, even in troubled times there was a bedrock faith in not just the effectiveness but the ethos of capitalism” (“Every Moment I’m Awake” n.pag.), now there has been a sharp decline in the enduring optimism that once characterized those who subscribed to the dream. Moreover, Jim Cullen makes the cogent point that the American Dream is as subject to the rhythms of rivalry as anything else in America, with the result that American Dreams compete with each other and jostle for space (“Twilight’s Gleaming” 19).

Increasingly over the last forty years, the American Dream has also promised fame. While celebrity is undeniably associated with upward mobility, it also touches a more profound need: that of recognition. People want to believe that their lives matter, and celebrity status gives even their most mundane actions greater import. In the media-saturated climate of present-day America, where one can become famous simply for making one's life public (think of reality TV celebrities or YouTube sensations), celebrity or, more accurately, recognition, is becoming a crucial aspect of the Dream (Sternheimer 8). In this respect, Erickson himself is not immune to its seductive charm. He frequently expresses his desire for a wider readership and is "as baffled by his own almost-success as anyone" (Evenson n.pag.). Believing himself a witness to both the twilight of America and the demise of late capitalism, the tone of Erickson's work is thoughtful and elegiac. Like Faulkner's *The Sound of the Fury*, he documents a disappearing world in language simultaneously condemning and complimentary.

The goal of this project, then, is to examine the ways in which Erickson's enduring obsession with America manifests itself in the very form of his work. His pointed symbolism disrupts the prevailing post-WWII mythology of the American highway, his dreamy, dissociative prose suggests a direct link between his private mind and the notion of an imagined America, the contradictions in his work and in himself mirror the paradox that is America, and he evaluates the promise of rock and roll with the same investigative caution and moral rigor that characterizes his evaluation of the American Dream. Erickson's thematic concerns manifest themselves in his prose to effectively form one long argument, across all of his novels and non-fiction, against a singular interpretation and/or definition of America or of *anything*: of Los Angeles, of

financial and familial security, of facts and friendship, and of American Dreams – which are “the dreams that sustain us” (*Tours of the Black Clock* 241). Erickson’s fierce ambiguity has to do with his moral commitment to honesty and his disavowal of ideology, under which “thoughts are invariably shaped in a way that’s selective, and once thought becomes selective, the thinker begins lying to himself” (*Leap Year* 155-156). Erickson’s conviction is that, in an America that has as many interpretations and definitions as citizens, the only intellectually honest position is one of ambiguity. Though Erickson occasionally demonstrates uncharacteristic firmness on issues in his journalism, his books remain ideologically vague, and he addresses problems carefully, without any promise of a totalizing resolution. Things thought to be concrete – time, identity, home – are fluid and unstable in his work.

Chapter Two, “The Malevolent American Highway,” argues that Erickson’s use of the road trope in his work harkens back to an older America when roads were treacherous. Offering Kerouac’s *On the Road* as a standing example of the kind of feverish post-WWII American optimism Erickson shuns, the chapter engages in both close reading and critical analysis to examine the various ways Erickson metaphorizes the highway in order to address the contradictions inherent to the American Dream. That Erickson chooses the highway, and not the home, as a symbol of American hope is explained, and his concept of “drivership” is related to the innate individualism of the American Dream.

Chapter Three, “My Own Private America,” considers the connection between the apocalyptic landscapes of Erickson’s fiction and his assertion that America itself is a private notion. The chapter begins by detailing Erickson’s childhood struggle with

stuttering and argues that his struggle helped to mold him as a writer and to ignite his obsession with the secret world of the individual – a major recurring theme in his work. The chapter then considers the geography of Erickson’s work by the lights of his dreamy, impressionistic style in order to demonstrate how these characteristics are wedded to his notion of a private America. An ensuing section on Victory Culture and American Exceptionalism further establishes the gulf between reality and actuality (the gulf where America dreams itself), and the chapter concludes with a brief examination of Erickson’s singular position in American letters, an isolation exacerbated by the abovementioned difficulty of categorizing his work.

Whereas Chapter Three examines dreams as ambitions, the oneiric quality of Erickson’s work, and the American Dream itself, Chapter Four, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” argues that America is an unsolvable riddle, a paradox that cannot be reconciled because of the flagrant contradictions apparent in its chief architect, Thomas Jefferson. The chapter demonstrates the contradictions inherent to Jefferson, to Erickson’s prose and his avoidance of absolutes, and to public perception of Obama and of Vietnam, with the conclusion that paradox is not a betrayal of America – it *is* America. The Dream of America is maintained by unconsciously misremembering the past, for an accurate appraisal of its own history would complicate the “official story” (Agnew 7) and condemn those who choose to believe it. As Louis Menand writes, “the only way to make the past usable is to misinterpret it, which means, strictly speaking, to lose it” (10). Again, this misinterpretation is made unconsciously in a process akin to dreaming. Erickson believes that the blind acceptance of contradictory accounts of the past is inherent to the operation of America and to the endurance of the American Dream.

Taking his cue from America, he strategically uses paradox and a dreamy, surrealistic style to complicate a straightforward reading of his own stories.

Chapter Five, “American Promises,” establishes a connection between the promise of America and the promise of rock and roll. In *Leap Year*, Erickson writes that “Thomas Jefferson invented rock and roll” (30), but he does not mean that the man actually played music. Rather, Jefferson embodies the correlation between the emphasis on individuality and the assertion of identity promised by both America and rock and roll. Moreover, the fact that Jefferson is often remembered by his best intentions and not his actual actions finds its echo in rock and roll martyrs who died young and therefore remain forever frozen in time, judged by their potential and all the things they may have gone on to do. Four figures are analyzed through this lens: Bruce Springsteen, Ronald Reagan, John Mellencamp, and Barack Obama. The chapter then considers the role of music in Erickson’s work, particularly in the novel *Zeroville*, and how it relates to American identity and to the spirit of America. It is connected to the main thesis in its argument that Erickson examines rock and roll for similar reasons (and in similar language) that he examines America. They are both held to the same standards, and both, at heart, have to do with identity. And, as Lee Spinks observes, “the conceptual rhythms of Erickson’s book replicate the imaginative structures present in the most important rock n roll of the last thirty years” (Spinks 222). Again, as with all of Erickson’s thematic obsessions, rock and roll influences the form of his work. Chapter Six concludes the thesis with a brief summary and calls attention to other recurring themes and motifs in Erickson’s work that were hesitantly neglected here for the sake of focus.

Steve Erickson is a unique figure in American literature whose work deserves



literary investigation and appreciation. That success has eluded him is more indicative of the shifting literary tastes of the reading public (as well as the difficulty of categorizing his work) than of the objective inferiority of his work to that of other successful authors who worry about America. For, while there are many other singular American voices in the literary landscape, Erickson insists “there's got to be room for both of [them]” (“A Conversation With Steve Erickson” n.pag.). Erickson’s work seeks to explore the nature of the American dream through the lens of the individual, while still attending to the historical freight of the common idea of America. His work is both personal and political; it grieves for the loss of America even as it hopes for its redemption. It is important. This project is an attempt to examine Erickson’s thematic obsessions and demonstrate how they colour the contours of his work.

## Chapter Two

### **The Malevolent American Highway: Establishing Steve Erickson's Location on the Roadmap of American Literature**

*There must be a highway somewhere, roads I've missed. Something more than sky out beyond the window.*

– Frank Sinatra, “Out Beyond the Window”

*...and the train reliably eludes him like the hour that's always an hour away.*

– Steve Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*

This chapter analyzes Steve Erickson's contributions to the American road narrative in order to examine the way he grapples with the iconography of the highway and its symbolic significance in America. The road is a rich symbol brimming with meaning in American literature because it allows authors to simultaneously depict sweeping cross-continental movement and dramatic personal transformations. Such thematic territory provides ample opportunity for the metaphorization of America and American experience. Erickson often takes to the road to worry about America in his work, usually to disrupt the notion that the road represents freedom. Therefore this chapter attends chiefly to his adversarial relationship with the road, occasionally referring to Jack Kerouac's watershed *On the Road* as a touchstone. Unlike the eager madness of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, Erickson's characters hit the American highway weary and unexcited. The questing nature of Erickson's characters ensures that they find no inherent pleasure in traveling roads full of potholes and barricades. Road travel is arduous and does not serve its own purpose. Often people do not know where (or even why) they are going. Even in Erickson's non-fiction the road proves treacherous and baffling. That latter quality is one of Erickson's hallmarks, and the chronic disorientation endured by his dramatis personae is inevitably transmitted onto his readers, who unwittingly

“become travellers in an unknown country without reliable road maps...where every signpost points us in several directions at once” (Spinks 216). Just as Erickson, by his own admission, writes about “the oldest themes in the world” (“Formula for Arc d’X” n.pag.), his approach to the road harkens back to an older, bygone America. It was not until “well into the nineteenth century” that Americans took to the road to relax (Slethaug “Mapping the Trope” 13), before such time travel was uncertain and dangerous.

Erickson’s travelers harken back to this darker epoch. They are not tourists. Aware of the long shadow cast by Kerouac’s tome, *On the Road* serves, in this essay, as a standing example of the kind of post-WWII optimistic spirit Erickson consciously avoids.

Erickson’s obsession with and attitude toward the American highway can be demystified by familiarizing oneself with his origins. He was raised in the San Fernando Valley in the 1950s, which was a predominantly rural area of Los Angeles. By all accounts his childhood was idyllic. His father, along with the fathers of his friends, worked in the aerospace industry, and the family lived in a modern subdivision. Exhibiting his unshakeable tendency to connect personal experience with wider political machinations, Erickson concludes that “Kennedy’s race to the moon built the modern Valley” (“I Was A Teenage Conservative” n.pag.). The pastoral calm of childhood did not last, however, as the house was razed to clear room for a new freeway, “leaving just the swimming pool that was proof of [his] parents’ upward mobility” (“I Was A Teenage Conservative” n.pag.). In a piece of trivia felicitous enough to sound fictional (considering Erickson’s savage animosity toward the 40<sup>th</sup> President) the highway was later renamed after Ronald Reagan. Erickson dismisses the impact of this formative experience in his journalism, writing that “[t]his sort of upheaval was too common to be

traumatizing” (“I Was A Teenage Conservative” n.pag.). His fiction, however, in which bleak maxims such as “[o]ne’s no longer young when he understands some things are irrevocable” (*Tours of the Black Clock* 178) are often found, suggests otherwise.

The front cover of Erickson’s debut novel depicts a dystopian Los Angeles half-buried in sand beneath a highway overpass. While the prospect of a first-time novelist having an influence over the artwork accompanying his book seems slim, and while it may seem crass to look for meaning in a cover – a well-worn adage warns young readers against such error – a description of Erickson’s childhood home from *Leap Year* sounds so similar to the cover of *Days Between Stations* that one can only conclude the artwork was deliberate: “Thus beneath the beams of an unfinished freeway disappearing in the dark above new moonscapes of dirt and dust what was left of my childhood was a lone patch of blue shimmering in the twilight” (*Leap Year* 18). This short passage contains many of Erickson’s recurring obsessions: the colour blue,<sup>6</sup> water,<sup>7</sup> aimlessness born of the destruction of the home, environmental upheaval, Los Angeles, the abrupt loss of innocence,<sup>8</sup> and the American highway. As the title of this chapter suggests, that last item is our chief concern. All of Erickson’s books are connected, and his overarching worries, obsessions – and even his jokes – run seamlessly from one to the next, like the common bond that connects towns strung across great highways. The road serves in Erickson’s work as a metaphor for disruption and instability (and of his characters’ powerlessness), and his ongoing obsession with highway iconography seems to have sprung from a road

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<sup>6</sup> Catalytic characters in Erickson’s oeuvre wear blue clothing, such as Michel from *Days Between Stations*, Kara from *Tours of the Black Clock*, and the mysterious female photographer from *Rubicon Beach*. In *Our Ecstatic Days* the colour disappears entirely from the world.

<sup>7</sup> Water is a major force/symbol in *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, *Rubicon Beach*, and *Our Ecstatic Days*.

<sup>8</sup> Children are often symbols of innocence in Erickson’s fiction, and incapable of evil (Kirk from *Our Ecstatic Days*, Sheeba from *These Dreams of You*, Polly from *Arc d’X*). Therefore the loss of childhood is the loss of innocence.

that took his childhood home from him and paved America across the psychitecture of his mind.

### **Genre and Movement**

The American road novel is a vibrant subset of American literature that often conflates movement with exploration of both country and self (Primeau 13). Like signs on a highway, familiar tropes and themes appear with benign regularity. If “stories of life on the road are often romantic quests for healing grace and apocalyptic vision followed by a return to the ordinary, with a transformed consciousness” (Primeau 6), then Erickson’s novels defy such generic expectations. There is no “return to the ordinary” because his fictional universe is so unordinary – disaster is general and the landscape is fantastic.<sup>9</sup> There is no “ordinary” to return to in Erickson because ordinary is not the default state of his universe. Dispensing with Primeau’s mandatory ordinariness, however, an elaboration of his definition of American the road novel can accommodate Erickson.

For legions of readers and critics, *On the Road* is the watershed text of post-WWII American road literature, the work that “brought cultural recognition of the formal ritual” of movement, speed and epiphany in the genre (Primeau 8). All subsequent American road novels either attempt to work within Kerouac’s template or “[try] to get out from under his influence” (Primeau 8). Erickson’s resistance to Kerouacian themes and tropes, however, paradoxically place his works firmly within the genre of American road literature, albeit an older mode. By their very nature, American road narratives make room for such ostensibly cavalier attitudes toward themselves, because they are “often at

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<sup>9</sup> Los Angeles is surrounded by raging fires in *Arc d’X* and *Amnesiascope*, is flooded in *Rubicon Beach* and *Our Ecstatic Days*, and is buried beneath sand in *Days Between Stations*. In *Tours of the Black Clock*, the rest of the world has not fared much better.

once old-fashioned, conventional, and revolutionary” (Primeau 4). This is to say that American road narratives operate using familiar tropes that exist in the readers’ “residual” expectations of genre (expectations formed by past experience with the genre which generate anticipation of familiar themes), but they also depart from these past cultural productions, simply by virtue of being another utterance (Primeau 4). Erickson’s work, roundly acknowledged as fiercely original in terms of structure and style, may initially seem like a disavowal of traditional American road literature when, in fact, such literature has always allowed for the kind of stylistic and attitudinal departures at play in his novels. The road is a recognizable symbol, a “conventional pattern” which “invites the modifications that make creativity possible” (Primeau 5). Therefore, Erickson’s adversarial relationship with what he calls “the malevolent American highway” (*American Nomad* 252) is still quintessentially American.<sup>10</sup> Danger has always stalked the American road, from the assaults on the American Indian by white settlers to the machinations of stagecoach robbers to the inheritance of a literary tradition doomed to disenchant, embodied by the countless disappointing road trips inspired by Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

Danger manifests itself on Erickson’s highways in the form of disaster. The apocalyptic environment of his fictive America is intended to convey America’s moral degradation<sup>11</sup> while also obstructing his characters’ respective quests. In *Rubicon Beach*,

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<sup>10</sup> In *American Nomad*, an ice storm follows him around the country, which opposes, in a sense, the passage in Kerouac’s *On The Road* when spring comes and “opens up the land” (Kerouac 34).

<sup>11</sup> Erickson presently points to torture and surveillance as examples of the moral decline of America. In the 1990s he was preoccupied with the rise (and exclusive rhetoric) of the religious Right. In the 1980s he was worried about poverty and the federal government’s then-nascent capacity for widespread surveillance.

vehicles represent imprisonment,<sup>12</sup> but there are also more minor inconveniences associated with the road in Erickson. A fictionalized Erickson has his vehicle stolen from a car wash in *Amnesiascope* (206). Upon renting a new one he is immediately pulled over in Iowa for speeding, despite the fact that he is driving the posted limit (221).<sup>13</sup> These disasters are meant to undercut the notion of the free and open road, and although Erickson frequently uses the road as a symbol, he is afraid of employing too-familiar tropes for fear of lapsing into cliché, so he peppers his work with disclaimers. “I’m not looking for America” he assures the reader in *Leap Year*, “[e]nough people over enough years have done that, they looked as far as the sun illuminated their line of vision, until they couldn’t follow that light any further” (14). This light over the horizon is the dream of America, as intangible as the dreams of sleep. While many Americans after WWII were drawn to “the open road, and the accompanying hope that a promise lay at the end of it” (Theroux “Remember the Cicadas” n.pag.), those of Erickson’s characters who follow the promise do so on treacherous roads. This atmosphere bleakly opposes the “comic and romantic road” on which travelers could expect “a resolution of serious complications [and] an evasion of threats and dangers” (Slethaug “Postmodern Masculinities” 167). Moreover, both Erickson’s characters and Erickson himself often travel backward into America, from west to east. While this is not unprecedented – Slethaug notes that Chinese and Japanese immigrants “came to the West and gradually pushed toward the East” (Slethaug “Mapping the Trope” 13) – he also maintains that any movement that is not east to west in the American road genre represents “more complicated and often difficult social and cultural relationships” (Slethaug “Postmodern

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<sup>12</sup> “I knew from there on out everything was going to be a windowless metal truck wherever I went and for as long as I lived” (*Rubicon Beach* 2).

<sup>13</sup> Like in *On the Road*, it must be “the California license plate that did it” (Kerouac 71).

Masculinities” 174). Eastward movement in Erickson reads simultaneously as deliberate and organic, a function of his geography but also in deliberate defiance of Manifest Destiny, against the historically westward migration of industry and pioneers.

The fantastic geography of Erickson’s fiction also contributes to the danger of his roads. His work refuses a fixed definition of America as well as the kind of fixed geography required for coherent road travel. As a result, his characters often become lost or stranded at transit depots for interminable periods of time.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Erickson is like Kerouac in that he has “nothing to offer anybody but [his] own confusion” (Kerouac 74). Indeed, it often seems that there is nothing for his characters to do but flounder aimlessly (this corresponds with the circular, repetitious themes and structures of Erickson’s work). However, such aimlessness is also in-line with the emphasis American road texts place on the *going*, not the arriving. As Baudrillard notes in *America*, “[t]he American moving around in the deserts and national parks does not give the impression of being on holiday. Moving around is his natural occupation” (102). Erickson himself echoes this notion: “I’m going to try one more time to say everything I can find in me that might be worth saying, and hope that whatever I find in me to say is only the road, and not where the road is going” (*Amnesiascope* 225). The circular nature of his work has to do with the urge to keep moving that characterizes American road texts. His characters often keep traveling even when they do not know where they are going because the act of going is what forges and sustains their temporal, fluid identities. Staying in one spot suggests roots, and “[i]n America, roots are the things which bind people and hold them

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<sup>14</sup> Jack (*Rubicon Beach*) and Michel (*Days Between Stations*) both find themselves stuck on a train for days. Like Bronte (*Our Ecstatic Days*) stranded at Pueblo D’Electrik station for months, Jack also has a weeklong wait at the mythical station of Angeloak. Characters such as Wade (*Arc d’X*), Zan (*These Dreams of You*), and Kristen (*Our Ecstatic Days*) all find themselves lost in cities (Aenopolis, Berlin, and Los Angeles, respectively) for extended periods of time while looking for somebody or something.



down. People rip the roots out, and then romanticize what's been severed" (*Leap Year* 47). Staying in one spot is to ignore the beckoning promise of America, however elusive that promise ultimately proves to be.

### **Drivership**

In contrast to Kerouac's sharp focus on the car as a mode of transportation, Erickson's characters rarely drive, preferring to take trains<sup>15</sup> or buses.<sup>16</sup> They also walk<sup>17</sup> or hitchhike.<sup>18</sup> Jason in *Days Between Stations* is a prototypical American except for the fact that he rides a bicycle everywhere. Vikar in *Zeroville* has his own prejudices against driving and prefers instead to take the bus around Los Angeles – appropriately, one of his favourite songs is “The Passenger” by Iggy Pop (217). In *Rubicon Beach*, the preferred method of transport is swimming or canoeing. In Erickson, most instances of travel involve cross-continental movement but almost none involve “drivership” (*Leap Year* 126) which is significant. As David Laderman points out, driving in a car is different from hitting the road on foot or horseback (Laderman 13). There is an “individualized nature” (Laderman 13) to car travel that makes moving by bus or train more communal, not in the Maoist sense, but in the sense that such modes tend to crowd out individual experience. This is not always a bad thing – one might recall the joyous flatbed ride Sal Paradise describes as “the greatest ride of [his] life” (Kerouac 17) but a similarly communal scene in *Tours of the Black Clock* depicts the darker side of such travel. Riding the rails during the Depression with a group of silently brooding men, Banning Jainlight decides that “camaraderie among the dispossessed is something that

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<sup>15</sup> Jack (*Rubicon Beach*), Michel (*Days Between Stations*), and Erickson himself (*Leap Year*).

<sup>16</sup> Lauren (*Days Between Stations*), Kristen (*The Sea Came In At Midnight*).

<sup>17</sup> Banning Jainlight and Adolf Hitler in *Tours of the Black Clock*.

<sup>18</sup> Georgie in *Arc d'X*.

only sixteen year olds believe in" after he is mugged at knifepoint (*Tours of the Black Clock* 24). Jainlight's destination is New York City, where he will later pen pulp novels for a living, contributing, in his own way, to another American literary tradition. His wry observation, however, blatantly opposes the worldview of Sal Paradise, who sought community and camaraderie among people on the road and believed fiercely in their basic goodness.

This oppositional stance is consistent across all of Erickson's books. Despite the fact that his characters spend almost as much time within the continental United States as Kerouac's, his books seem somehow less American. Larry McCaffery has written that Erickson's writing seems more Japanese than American, because the frequent recurrence in his work of themes often found in Japanese literature, namely "self-obliteration, self-effacement, [and] a kind of creative masochism" (McCaffery 420). Moreover, the lack of "drivership" in Erickson defies general expectations of the road genre by limiting the inherent freedom of the road. His characters are passengers, but never in taxis. They do not dictate their routes. This seems less American (though not wholly un-American) because those who engage with a given cultural production do so with a general expectation that various generic/thematic checkpoints will be crossed throughout the course of the work. In terms of the American road narrative, this expectation – or, more accurately, "[g]enre memory" (Primeau 2) – helps to perpetuate the notion that travel by car is particularly American (which implies that travel by other means is somehow less so, or in defiance of the genre). As Baudrillard puts it, in America, "when your drivers license goes, so does your identity" (*America* 122).

Erickson's novels often eschew the single vehicle road trip in order to escape the

long shadow cast by Kerouac's book and to emphasize his characters' different relationships to the American spaces they encounter. Indeed, there is no mad Ahab or sleepless Moriarty at the wheel of Erickson's novels. In this way, one can see how Erickson's obsession with the treacherous American highway dictates the form and plotlines of his work. People rarely travel by car (and when they do, they do not drive), and this is a deliberate strategy by Erickson in order to depict their lack of agency. In *Days Between Stations*, the highways of America are flanked by great walls, so that those who travel along them cannot see the blighted fields beyond. As the text mentions, "nobody talked anymore of what might be behind the walls, or of what America looked like" (*Days Between Stations* 249). Even the title of Erickson's debut evokes the interminability of long bus or train trips that, because they are routed, automatically limit the possibilities for exploration and therefore self-discovery. By definition, they are limiting. However, as stated above, this is not anti-American, only differently American.

### **Two (or More) Americas**

John Kouwenhoven observes that, of those who seek America by traveling its roads, "most of [them] seem to have found not one but two or more antipodal and irreconcilable Americas" (*The Beer Can by the Highway* 40). This theory holds true over a number of Erickson's texts, and even holds up in Kerouac's. In *Rubicon Beach*, America is divided into "America One" and "America Two" (though none of the characters agree on how or where this division is made). For a man who charges exorbitant prices to drive illegal Mexican immigrants across the border into Los Angeles, America One is Hollywood, which produces movies for America Two – the rest of America. For Cale, a man jailed for sedition, America One is the America he remembers

while America Two is the one that exists. In *American Space/American Place*, John Agnew divides America into that which has regional identity (a place), and that which is a blank slate (a space with the potential to be made into a place). He also sees America bisected across more particular aspects, such as the power struggle between federal and state governments, a struggle that dates back to a time when the newly formed federal government had to “establish its functions and legitimacy, whereas the states only had to start from where the old Colonial governments left off [and] sovereignty was effectively split between the two levels” (12). Kouwenhoven ultimately concludes that, because “conflicting evidence turns up everywhere you look...the observer has to content himself with some sort of pluralistic conception” of America (Kouwenhoven 40). The application of two Americas in *Rubicon Beach* is faithful to Kouwenhoven’s theory of pluralism while also serving to poke fun at Hollywood’s maddening propensity to produce sequels.<sup>19</sup>

Erickson concurs with Kouwenhoven and adds that the split is “by no means an unfamiliar fault line. It's been there since Jefferson and Hamilton squared off” (“The 9/11 President” n.pag.). This fault line is mentioned again in *American Nomad* when Erickson laments that “the distance between the America in my head and the America beneath my feet [is] much farther than the length of my body” (12). Again, despite initially seeming divisive or even mildly treasonous, the idea of two Americas fits into a larger tradition of American literature. Even Sal Paradise saw two Americas, divided “between the east of [his] youth and the West of [his] future” (Kerouac 12). Depending on which American

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<sup>19</sup> A veteran movie critic who holds a B.A. in film from UCLA, Erickson’s oeuvre is rife with such in-jokes regarding cinema.

author one reads, the gulf between two Americas expands and contracts, but it is always there, particularly in the road novel.

### **Recollection and Regret**

Erickson's work belongs to a greater cohort of contemporary American road literature, in which there is a postmodern awareness of Whitmanesque innocence and expressions of yearning for such spirited optimism (Slethaug "Postmodern Masculinities" 169), but said optimism is noted chiefly for its absence. There is a "reshaping" of "road conventions...each time a new work [enters] the increasingly complex tradition" of American road literature (Primeau 29), and Erickson's grim contributions are part of this reshaping. In *Leap Year*, he takes a train east across "the United States that was once America" to cover the 1988 presidential campaign (45). His friend and fellow novelist Michael Ventura joins him in Texas. Such circumstances seem to have all the makings of a buddy trip, except Erickson and Ventura are not "personalities based on complimentary opposites" (Slethaug "Postmodern Masculinities" 168) – they are both reactionary and cautious. Consistent with Erickson's approach toward the road, the overall mood of the trip is glum, as the two men seek inexpensive nachos in poor districts and explore abandoned industrial parks. Even a late-night jaunt to see a band in Austin seems perfunctory, done solely for the purpose of writing about it later rather than from any sincere enthusiasm to hear some rock and roll. The two men discuss politics in dejected tones, and the trip is utterly bereft of joy or fun. Of course, Erickson remains a passenger. "I have already broached and retreated from the touchy subject of drivership. Ventura pales and swallows hard as if I've just asked him to hand over his private parts" (*Leap Year* 126). Ventura hogs the wheel, believing that driving legitimizes and confirms his

agency. Erickson is acutely aware of this, having spent most of the summer on a train, and is eager for his turn. He does not get it. The men have no stated destination, spiritual or physical, and the trip disintegrates unceremoniously.

Echoes of this morose road trip can be found in *The Sea Came In At Midnight*, in which Louise Blumenthal, along with her husband Mitchell and her brother Billy, drive aimlessly across America in a poorly insulated van selling a faked pornographic snuff film directly to consumers. They also attempt to convince theatre owners to show their movie, “hoping their reputations [haven’t] preceded them” (120). These road trips are sordid affairs, and the trio is either arguing or fuming in bitter silence: “They were sitting in Billy’s van just west of town on the Indiana side of the state line, Louise in the backseat staring south in the direction of Kentucky, Billy gazing northwest at Indiana, and Mitch mulling the black pockets of Ohio east of them” (120). The three sit unspeaking in a freezing van, not looking at each other, staring out into America. Their directional orientation, each of them staring at a different state, represents their metaphorical distance from each other, as well as the indifferent largeness of America. Later these trips will haunt Louise, as she realizes that her fake snuff film has gone on to influence countless real ones and that she is, in a way, responsible for the torture and murder of countless young women.

In the context of American road texts, John Jakle identifies eight successive stages in the travel process, “predisposition to travel, trip preparation, departure, outward movement, turnabout, homeward movement, return, and trip recollection” (*The Tourist* 10). This last stage is crucial for the production of road literature. As Ann Charters notes, Kerouac would not have been able to write as much as he did if he did not live “a kind of

monastic life” (Charters 6) at home in a stable atmosphere that allowed him to write down and stylize his experiences. One could even argue that it is in the recollection stage that American road literature is truly made. As adventurous and poetic as Neal Cassady’s life may have been, many of his experiences are either lost to the ages or mediated through the minds of other writers like Ginsberg or Kerouac. For Louise, her recollections are a source of trauma. She is haunted by her time on the road and what it represents. While “trip recollection” may be crucial for the production of literature, Louise’s recollections involve guilt over something she has already produced. The road, for her, represents both the reduction of choice she herself faced (the financial failure of her first two pornographic films is what prompts her to fake a murder in her third), and the reduction of choice that led to young women agreeing to appear in copycat films that resulted in their own murder. Louise is haunted by the road she chose. Again, this is consistent with Erickson’s attitude toward the American highway. From the freeway that destroyed his childhood home to the surreal, apocalyptic roads that snake through his fictive landscape, the dream of America is never within reach of those who take to these highways.

### **Agency and the American Dream**

The reduction of choice (which is, essentially, the reduction of freedom) is a recurring theme in Erickson’s fiction, and often manifests itself during travel. *Rubicon Beach* is a tripartite novel in which all three protagonists dream of each other despite having never met, all of whom find themselves prisoners in some form while traveling across America. In the first section, Cale is brought to and from a gulag-type building on the Montana-Saskatchewan frontier in a windowless metal truck. Like Lauren in *Days*

*Between Stations*, he has no way of choosing his destination and no way of seeing the landscape of his country pass by outside the window. In the second part of the novel, Catherine purchases passage to America with an exploitative van driver who keeps demanding more money from his exhausted passengers and insisting they are not yet in America even after they cross the border at Laredo (for this man, America is Los Angeles, not the continental United States). Noticing the driver's increasing agitation, Catherine jumps out the window and runs away. Upon arriving in downtown L.A., she is exploited by the first American she meets, a struggling screenwriter named Richard, who takes her home to be his maid-slave. In the third section, a brilliant mathematician named Jack buys a train ticket West to find his mother, who disappeared years ago. The train flies "into the dream of America," crosses an endless river and is never seen again (290). Erickson is writing here about the danger of chasing the light at the end of the road that both illuminates the highway and serves as its destination. If the American dream trembles at the end of an American highway, and Americans are "slaves of their dreams" (*Leap Year* 138), then it stands to reason that those who pursue the dream ruthlessly may never be seen or heard from again, because the dream is by its very nature unreachable. Searching for what America promises, Erickson's characters sometimes follow the dream off the map, for they are "slaves of their dreams". The road often emphasizes isolation, not fellowship.

In *Rubicon Beach*, all roads lead to imprisonment. In *Tours of the Black Clock*, the exhausted duo of Banning Jainlight and Adolf Hitler trudge all the way to New York City from Mexico without being stopped or even noticed. This passage is surely meant to be a comment on the declining political awareness of the average American, but it also



throws a few barbs at the facelessness of militarism.<sup>20</sup> This passage also fits into a larger theme in Erickson's oeuvre. Nobody drives, because driving represents a particular kind of agency Erickson does not wish to depict for strategic reasons. The sole instance of "drivership" in *American Nomad* ends with Erickson's car spinning out of control. He wakes up in an ambulance, screaming in pain from each bump in the road (246). This is a metaphorization of the gulf between the promise of America and the reality of America, shown in the discrepancy between the promise and the reality of the road.

### **The Old World and The New World**

Of course, the distance between myth and reality in America is not particular to post-WWII American fiction. As Sacvan Bercovitch notes:

...all our classic writers (to varying degrees) labored against the myth as well as within it. All of them felt, privately at least, as oppressed by Americanism as liberated by it. And all of them, however captivated by the national dream, also *used* the dream to reach beyond the categories of their culture. (Bercovitch 87)

While this quote might be construed as unwittingly elitist (and inevitably ignite debate over which writers belong in the canon of "classics"), Bercovitch would likely identify this contradiction in the work of any author who deigns to worry about America.

Erickson relates to this idea, often commenting on the "America that got sick of being America" (*Amnesiascope* 127), and he not only eschews the most American form of travel, he also frequently de-Americanizes his characters by giving them atypical or foreign spellings. Instead of Michael in *Days Between Stations*, it is Michel. In *These Dreams of You*, Alexander calls himself Zan; Kristen prefers the name Saki in *The Sea*

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<sup>20</sup> "I must remind myself that the soldiers on the corners aren't Germans but Americans. I must also remind myself that it may not matter, it may even be worse" (300).

*Came in at Midnight*; the protagonist in *Zeroville* changes his name from Ike to Vikar; and in *Tours of the Black Clock* the ferryman spells his name Marc instead of Mark.

Reaching further still beyond American culture, Erickson's characters often travel to Europe, where the prose changes to reflect the thickness and history of the "Old World," as Erickson calls it (*These Dreams of You* 305). While his American scenes are tough and specific, influenced by such hard-boiled noir practitioners as Jim Thompson and Raymond Chandler, his descriptions of Europe take on a lyrical, poetic quality. Jonathan Lethem has noticed that this transition never seems forced: "Erickson's prose shifts easily from concrete and tangible and sensory images to extremely abstract language" ("The Art of Fiction" n.pag.). In Erickson's Europe, buildings are old and gnarled. Palimpsests abound. Streets twist and turn back on themselves and "Mongolian domes swoop nightward" (*Tours of the Black Clock* 24). This deliberate stylistic transformation is intended to display the "sweeping qualitative difference between America and other countries" (Bercovitch 82). Indeed, "American road authors feel strongly that their country's history is short by world standards" (Primeau 15), and Erickson's prose shifts to accommodate that felt difference. In *America*, Baudrillard notes the "newness" of the United States, concluding that "America was created in the hope of escaping from history" (87). In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis claims that the droves of European intellectuals who fled Nazi-occupied Europe for Hollywood fled right back when the war was over, having missed the "historical aura" of their now ruinous cities (47). Erickson attends to this deeply felt difference by altering the very rhythms of his prose because his thematic aims always dictate his form.

Characteristically, Baudrillard suspects that this felt discrepancy between America

and Europe might be illusory. “When I see Americans...casting a nostalgic eye toward Europe,” he writes, “its history, its metaphysics, its cuisine, its past, I tell myself that this is just a case of unhappy transference” (*America* 85-86). Baudrillard likewise declares that Europeans who find themselves envying America’s utter modernity are victims of the same “unhappy transference”. However, Baudrillard rented a car on his now infamous trip to America. He must have felt that driving was the only proper way to discover its contours, if not its meaning. He knew that the highway preserved, or perhaps created, the illusion that is America: “What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction” (29).<sup>21</sup> Just as it seems fitting that Baudrillard should rent a car in America, it does not seem odd that Erickson’s characters should take trains while in Europe, while in America, such travel would seem quaint and unusual.

## **Conclusion**

As Primeau notes, “the decision to go on the road most often arises from some dissatisfaction or desire for change. The ensuing adventures and the writing of the narrative often take the form of social and political protest” (15). Erickson’s abiding cynicism requires him to pretend otherwise, but *American Nomad* is decidedly a “road quest” book. He cannot protest that he was tasked with writing it, as he was fired after a hand-in in a few half-hearted pieces to *Rolling Stone* early in the 1996 primaries. He is therefore on the road because he wants to be, or at least feels compelled to be. Erickson “drives on, impelled by wanderlust, to discover and reveal the contradictions of America” (Laderman 13). He is acutely aware that the contradictions of America are part of America (see Chapter Four) and also that his criticisms of his country are quintessentially

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<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere he writes that the spirit of America is “the spirit of fiction” (129).

American. However cynical *American Nomad* may be (indeed it is much angrier in tone than the similarly conceived *Leap Year*), it is still about chasing the dream of America. *Rubicon Beach*, *Leap Year*, *Tours of the Black Clock*, *Arc d'X*, and *The Sea Came in at Midnight* all feature substantial sections depicting highway travel and can be read, in their own way, as road quest books too. Without exception, all of Erickson's books worry about America, but his obsession is born of his primordial love for, if not belief in, its dream. He pens love letters to America even while disrupting and disputing its most potent myths, particularly the myth that the American highway leads to the American dream.

Only America could have produced Steve Erickson, though his themes are ultimately universal. He fits squarely within the tradition of American writers as a dreamer, though a lugubrious one, and his more specific contributions to the American road text emphasize his participation in the ongoing process of America and American writing. His highways are sometimes even exoticized, rendered in unfamiliar language meant to imply their danger: "Coursing through the city were a thousand rivers like the rivers of the jungle, except that these were gray rivers of rock, some of them hurtling into the sky" (*Rubicon Beach* 139). This is not to say that staying home is somehow better – most of Erickson's novels take place in Los Angeles, where earthquakes are a constant threat, and the reader likely recalls what happened to Erickson's first house. But the road is looked at as an inevitability of American life, an inescapable inconvenience, and most of his characters come to it with weary resignation, not out of attendance to some vague hope humming over the horizon. Fires, floods, sandstorms, snowstorms, and a generally biblical atmosphere of end times threaten the roads of Erickson's America. This ongoing

apocalypse is a necessary conceit that allows him worry about the meaning of his country, because, for Erickson, “the value and meaning of ‘America’ can only be explicated and reaffirmed in the light of last things” (Spinks 215). In other words, in order for America to be analyzed it can no longer be an ongoing process, which is why Erickson halts it by writing general disaster throughout his fictional, private America. He is haunted by its lost promise, and his disenchantment haunts his fictive roads. His roads are treacherous and mendacious. They roll through the scorched landscape of an obliterated world meant both to convey America’s moral decline and its ongoing broken promise. The following chapter examines how Erickson employs these scorched landscapes metaphorically in order to worry about America.

## Chapter Three

### **My Own Private America: Erickson's Unfamiliar Geographies and Curious Climates**

Michael Ventura: *Your concept of change is always private. Nobody in these novels thinks they could affect a wider change.*

Steve Erickson: *No. They're all loners. And I'm a loner.*

– Excerpt from “Phantasmal America: An Interview With Steve Erickson”

*I'm a patriot – of the Fourteenth Ward, Brooklyn, where I was raised. The rest of the United States doesn't exist for me, except as idea, or history, or literature.*

– Henry Miller, *Black Spring*

Moving beyond the American highway, this chapter analyzes the geography of Erickson's work in order to explore how it relates to his conviction that America is a dream of itself. Just as his highways are metaphorized and employed symbolically, so too are the crazed landscapes beneath the roads. The formal conceits of Erickson's work are manifestations of his personal approach to the political: the mythical West, the dystopian Los Angeles, the frozen wastes and barren plains – these are all visions of his own private America. Cognizant that the ideal America in his mind does not exist in the world, least of all in the minds of his fellow Americans, Erickson articulates his frustrations by writing apocalypse across his fictional America, a landscape perennially beset by strange weather, environmental upheaval, and unusual meteorological phenomena. These anarchic forces often disrupt communication and damage infrastructure (hence the mangled roads), interfering with his characters pointed quests.

The geography of Erickson's world – particularly of America – bears familiar resemblance to the real world but with significant, usually fantastic changes. These bizarre landscapes fulfill Darko Suvin's generic requirement for science fiction – that of “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin 39), and his use of supernatural objects fulfill the

aesthetic requirements of high fantasy, but Erickson resists planting his flag in either of these generic territories. His solitary nature resists submission to the homogenizing effects of genre, and, as Brian Evenson has noted, the works themselves also resist generic categorization even as they emulate generic conventions (Evenson “The Romantic Fabulist” n.pag.).

Erickson’s unfamiliar geographies are fictive manifestations of his oft-repeated claim that ostensibly collective myths are actually deeply private ones, evocations that vanish when articulated because they do not hold up under the scrutiny that follows utterance. Whether these manifestations are consciously or unconsciously employed during the writing process itself is beside the point, both for our purposes and for Erickson’s.<sup>22</sup> What matters is that these narrative strategies give visual coherence to Erickson’s world across separate books while simultaneously emphasizing his singular, private view of what America is (or, perhaps more accurately, what America is not).<sup>23</sup> Erickson’s work insists that the felt experience of being American is different for every American, even if there are familiar signposts and accepted national narratives. In his non-fiction, Erickson is far more concerned with who politicians *are* than what they do. He is interested in understanding how figures like Bob Dole, Pat Buchanan, and Barack Obama *think*. One gets the sense that he would read their diaries given the opportunity, for he is obsessed with the machinations of their private minds and with how the political affects the private. As someone who “still thinks that the original idea of America is

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<sup>22</sup> “I never thought it was all that important that I completely understand what I was saying, I knew the books came from some place more real to me than any literal understanding” (*Amnesiascope* 197).

<sup>23</sup> I use the word “private” here not as a binary to “public,” but to mean personal yet visible, the same way that private property is visible yet not always easy to engage with. Erickson’s sense of America is informed by his own personal emotions and experiences, therefore the word “private” in this chapter is intended to mean “that which is not easily accessible or understandable but is still recognizable”. It isn’t to say that all citizens exist in a bubble and all social transactions are instances of mutual distrust, but that Erickson’s approach emphasizes the personal and the solitary, which is why his geographies metaphorize isolation.

pretty mind-boggling; in the sense of a place where there are times that the will of the state must subvert its will to the will of a single citizen” (“Steve Erickson”), Erickson is often guilty of misreading Jefferson in order to return to this point again and again in his work – that the individual’s conception of America dwarfs the common idea of a United States.

With this notion of an imagined America in mind, the first quarter of this chapter will explore the relationship between the motif of stuttering and Erickson’s early development of the kind of solitary temperament suitable for writing. The inner isolation caused by his stuttering helped form Erickson’s personal approach to his writing and his notion of a secret America. The second quarter will analyze several geographic locations in Erickson’s fiction in the context of the oneiric nature of his narratives with the conclusion that both serve as metaphors for the Dream of America. The third quarter considers the relationship between ambition, images and the Dream of America, while the final quarter evaluates Victory Culture and its effect on the Dream with a brief aside on the Sixties. Throughout the chapter, references to the American Dream will be capitalized, whereas the difference between “dream” as a synonym for “ambition” and the dreams of sleep should be made clear by the surrounding context.

### **Stuttering and the Making of a Writer**

“[W]e’re going to pretend – don’t take this personally – that you’re not here at all,” writes Erickson in the closing paragraph of *Amnesiascope*. “Most of the best things I’ve ever said, the most fluid, stutterless, *sonorous* things, were to myself” (225). It would be crass (and perhaps even mildly exploitative) to analyze whether Steve Erickson’s speech problems as a child endowed him with the temperament and patience to be a



writer, if not for the fact that Erickson himself has suggested as much. In *Amnesiascope*, one of his most blatantly autobiographical novels, Erickson writes frankly about the severe stuttering he endured as a child and how that struggle shaped his imagination (148).<sup>24</sup> Rather than resort to pop psychology or refer to medical journals that attest to the considerable word power of those who struggle with speech, it would be best to use Erickson's own words to establish the clear relationship between his writing and his stuttering. On this point, he is uncharacteristically blunt, writing that "if [he'd] never stuttered, [he] never would have become a writer" (*Amnesiascope* 149). The inability to speak "cut [him] off from the world," and forced him to "[live] a lot inside [his] own head" ("Stuttering and Writing" n.pag.), and the resulting solitude fired his imagination and planted the seeds of his original, private vision. He recalls "words tangling on [his] tongue," stalling and turning back on themselves, an experience which may have influenced the circular nature of his novels (*Amnesiascope* 147).

Moreover, Erickson's claim that "[i]n the Stutter was born the Dream" (*Amnesiascope* 150) implies a relationship between his speech problems as a boy and the quiet development of his fictive dreamscape. This interpretation cannot be disentangled from his repeated assertion that America is a dream, not a place, nor can it be separated from his individual dream (ambition) to be a writer. In *Amnesiascope*, he relates an anecdote in which he was accused of plagiarism after handing in a short story, his third grade teacher having decided that, because he could not speak, he could not read or write either. Years passed before teachers were finally convinced that he wrote the thing, by which time their disapproval had shifted to the content of his (now admittedly original)

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<sup>24</sup> This emotional tangent is sparked by an audience member condescendingly congratulating him on not stuttering during a bookstore reading.

writing (149). “It was too late,” writes Erickson. “Having asserted my imagination and won my voice, I would not give them back” (149). If, as this anecdote suggests, Erickson’s struggle for speech is indistinguishable from his efforts to form a writerly voice, then surely his childhood stuttering dictates the content and form of his work, content and form that are forever retreating into that which is private, which is individual, which is secret?

From an early age, Erickson staked a claim of possession over both his writing and his stuttering, and such possession suggests the formation of the confidence necessary for writing: “In the interior of my imagination, my words always belonged to me, I did not belong to them” (*Amnesiascope* 149). His word choice here is significant, particularly because he is so preoccupied with the theme of possession (many of his characters equate it with love), but also because he has spent so much time fictively reimagining the interior of his own America. He molds it into whatever he wants it to be. However, this may mark the limit of what one can or should glean from the stuttering motif in Erickson’s work. Indeed, it is difficult to not feel guilty for bringing it up. “Here are the rules,” he warns, “I can talk about this, you can’t. The most casual reference to it by another person still humiliates me...no one ingratiates him or herself, no one worms his or her way into my confidence, by initiating a discussion on stuttering” (*Amnesiascope* 148). With this rebuke in mind, we will move on to the geography of Erickson’s fiction.

### **The American Rubicon**

The vagaries of Erickson’s private America spring from the American geographical imagination – specifically Thomas Jefferson’s notions of voracious

expansionism. Curiously, despite Erickson's preoccupation with the big individual/small government dynamic championed by Jefferson, he never espouses the proprietary attitude toward private property that typically accompanies such a stance. Property ownership is not a major thematic concern of Erickson's – it is occasionally considered, but only as a point of ridicule, not as a pillar of the American dream.<sup>25</sup> Erickson focuses rather on American expansion, which presently, with no land left to claim, he sees as a psychic expansion.<sup>26</sup> In the psycho-geography of his fictional America, there is a very wide river somewhere in the American Northwest. This river figures significantly in *Rubicon Beach*, *Tours of the Black Clock*, and *Arc d'X*, and is hinted at in *Leap Year* and *The Sea Came in at Midnight*. It flows east of Los Angeles, cutting the city off from the rest of the country.

Los Angeles, for Erickson, is “the rubicon of America” (Silverblatt n.pag.).<sup>27</sup> Nestled on the coast where America ceased expanding geographically, it is the point from which Americans leap off the edge and pursue a psychic Manifest Destiny. Erickson insists that this still further movement moves metaphorically westward because it must necessarily move away from the Old World and the rest of America into unknown territory. Mike Davis also considers Los Angeles to be the place where Manifest Destiny reached its terminus, its “long arc” (*City of Quartz* 105) having finally settled on the

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<sup>25</sup> A major plot point in *These Dreams of You* concerns the imminent foreclosure of Zan's house, but Zan is only worried because his house represents security, not upward mobility (rats climb the walls). Moreover, Erickson has stated that he preferred the days when he kept a rented apartment in the city (“Every Moment I'm Awake” n.pag.).

<sup>26</sup> Unless, of course, Puerto Rico does become the 51<sup>st</sup> state, as various rumors suggest may happen (Patterson “Will Puerto Rico Become America's 51<sup>st</sup> State?”).

<sup>27</sup> Rubicon is a reference to the endeavors of Julius Caesar, who was irrevocably committed militarily to the Civil War after crossing the Rubicon River in Italy in 49 BCE. Erickson's standing definition of the word is a limit or line that when crossed permits no return and generally results in irreversible commitment. Throughout this chapter all references to Erickson's fictional Rubicon River are capitalized, whereas references to a more general point of no return will not be capitalized.

golden shores of California, but he does not attend to Erickson's notion of further expansion.

For his entire career, Erickson has repeatedly proclaimed Los Angeles to be an aberration of America, referring to "the L.A. border" in *Amnesiascope* (34), which in that particular novel is a ring of fire that separates the city from the heartland. A mysterious lake floods Los Angeles in *Our Ecstatic Days*, trapping citizens on the top floors of old hotels, and the bifurcated America in *Rubicon Beach* is split between Los Angeles and the rest of the country. Finally, Erickson reimagines Los Angeles as the theocratic police-state Aenopolis in *Arc d'X*, whose citizens can only leave by jumping off a cliff into the Pacific Ocean. Across Erickson's novels, each version of the city is rendered in dreamy, surreal imagery. This is deliberate. Los Angeles is the rubicon of America for Erickson because it is the film capital of the world, the place where the world is imagined,<sup>28</sup> and the place to which dreamers flock. For this same reason, it is also America's "dream dump, the place where the original promises of the American Dream find their most vivid incarnation – and their most traumatic betrayal" ("An Interview With Steve Erickson" 396).<sup>29</sup> In *Rubicon Beach*, a group of aspiring screenwriters from New York discuss the prospect of going to L.A. "with the urgency and irrevocability of those considering a journey of light years to another celestial system" (161). They know that to go to Los Angeles means they might face the reality of seeing their dreams destroyed. The decision is a metaphorical rubicon, and is therefore rendered in the language of irrevocability. Some decide it is safer not to go and wonder than to go and realize that their ambitions far exceed their talent. But rather than pepper his fiction with angry screeds against the

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<sup>28</sup> For Baudrillard, the movies "are not something to dream about, they are the dream" (*America* 59).

<sup>29</sup> "beauty immigrates to Los Angeles not just to trade on its surface allure but to become the face of people's dreams" (*Amnesiascope* 129).

shallow-yet-irresistible nature of Los Angeles, Erickson reimagines it and renders it metaphorically and impressionistically – dreamily, if you will – as a place that is simultaneously seductive and dangerous, a place impossible to leave without giving up something essential.

Yet, for Erickson, a native of the city, people cannot claim to be essentially *of* Los Angeles. “No one is a citizen of Los Angeles,” he writes, “in Los Angeles everyone is a citizen of his dreams, and if he doesn’t have any dreams he’s a nomad” (*The Sea Came in at Midnight* 204). Earlier in *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, a cartographer named Carl is hired by Los Angeles but is promptly fired for drawing maps of his own psycho-geography – corners on which he enjoyed romantic rendezvous or parks he is fond of are given disproportionate visual prominence. Called upon to defend his work, Carl insists they are “Maps of Real Life” (173). He is promptly fired. Soon after, hotels and streets begin to crumble across the city, representing his anguish.<sup>30</sup> In Erickson’s fiction “[t]he disorienting spatial and temporal features...are created not in the service of attempting to describe some possible future, but as a formal means of capturing a sense of Los Angeles’ dizzying ability to alienate its citizens from each other and from themselves” (McCaffery 396). Carl’s private city is akin to Erickson’s private America, both of which expose the corrosive effects of loneliness and isolation.

The Rubicon River represents a psychic point of no return in Erickson’s fiction. It is unstable. Sometimes it is easily traversable. Other times it has “has no other side” (*Tours of the Black Clock* 199). The Rubicon – also referred to, once, as the American River in *Leap Year* (86) – represents an ongoing Manifest Destiny by which America

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<sup>30</sup> “Los Angeles...becomes, every time you go there, a greater and greater monument to what you’ve achieved or, more to the point, failed to achieve – the urbanology of your own success or failure” (*Amnesiascope* 47).

continues expanding though it has run out of land. Characters often attempt to cross it after enduring great trauma, self-inflicted or otherwise. Jack in *Rubicon Beach* tries to cross it by train and becomes stranded for an interminable length of time at Angeloak (a train station embedded in a great tree that grows from the Rubicon River below). He eventually realizes that he missed his chance to chase the American Dream years earlier, standing at the East bank of the same river:

He made a mistake once. I don't know if he knows it. He was standing on the banks of a river listening to something from the other side, something he had never heard but always known. And instead of crossing the river, he listened for as long as he could stand it and then turned his back and returned the way he had come. And he's never heard it again. He should have crossed that river. (284)

Jack once heard the Dream of America calling to him, but he was afraid to chase it, like the aforementioned reluctant screenwriters. When he finally does cross the river, years later, the Dream has changed, because the Dream grows and changes at the same pace as its dreamer.<sup>31</sup> Erickson is also talking here about the irrevocability of decisions, and gives Jack a kind of Fitzgeraldian verdict. There are no second acts in American life for him. He lies down on the railroad tracks to await the next train, which arrives to crush him on the novel's final page.

Earlier in the same novel, a hack screenwriter realizes that his ambitions and dreams are one and the same: "Faced with the truth of his talent, [he] learned his life didn't belong to him anymore but rather to his dreams, which had been repossessed by

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<sup>31</sup> In *American Nomad*, Erickson mentions how different he felt writing *Leap Year* eight years previously, a very similar book of election coverage. "If it was a different America now, I was a different American, the distance between the America in my head and the America beneath my feet much farther than the length of my body" (4).

age” (161). Llewellyn is one of the many Americans who go to Los Angeles to realize their dreams only to watch them float beyond their grasp. The trauma of this realization manifests itself in an unusual, highly metaphorical manner: the rooms and windows in Llewellyn’s house begin to move. He comes home one day to find his front door is a few inches to the left. The next day he cannot find his bathroom. Llewellyn hires contractors to put things back in place, but each day he wakes to find something has moved again. Because the house is a common symbol for the American Dream of prosperity, the baffling instability of Llewellyn’s house demonstrates the mercurial quality of the Dream, and his increasing disorientation represents the confusion and anguish that results from his realization that the Dream has moved beyond his grasp (and was therefore always beyond his control).

In *Arc d’X*, Sally Hemings crosses the Rubicon while looking for Thomas Jefferson (who is out campaigning for the presidency) and instead stumbles through a time portal into Aenopolis, a dystopian theocratic city that has usurped Los Angeles. She is so traumatized by this development (as well as by years of rape at Jefferson’s hands) that she cannot pronounce the word “America” (a police officer who questions her thinks he hears the words “a miracle” – which attests to his own private America) (*Arc d’X* 87). Released into the anarchic chaos of the Aboretum – the lawless quarter of town – it takes the destitute Sally years to find her way out. Both Llewellyn and Sally’s inability to leave the city is Erickson riffing on the nature of Los Angeles, how some people go there and are never seen again, or how some take years to leave: “All the people...who come here hating the city and what it stands for: four months later they confirm every stereotype you’ve ever seen or heard about Los Angeles, because they came here looking for Los

Angeles to tell them who they were” (“Steve Erickson” n.pag.). After missing his first and only chance, Jack tries to cross the Rubicon and is never seen again. Sally crosses it and lands in a strange city she cannot escape. Ideas (the American Dream) and places (Los Angeles) that exist in actual America take on different, more sinister forms in Erickson’s fictional America. This is similar to the tension between “space” and “place” mentioned in Chapter Two.

On the other side of the Rubicon River – if one gets there – is Davenhall Island.<sup>32</sup> The closest geographical hint that we receive is that it is “somewhere north of Sacramento” (*The Sea Came in at Midnight* 15). As Kathy Acker asks, “What world is this? The population of Davenhall is Chinese, and Davenhall isn't in China” (“It Was Hitler’s Pornographer” n.pag.). Davenhall is an island populated almost exclusively by Chinese people but which is not itself Chinese. It also is not American. It is somewhere else. Erickson may be hinting at the next candidate for world superpower, or perhaps the train tracks over the Rubicon run all the way across the ocean to China. It is ambiguous. The island often serves as a setting for plot resolution, a terminus to which characters come to piece together the broken pieces of their lives. It is where Kara travels to find her missing mother in *Tours of the Black Clock*. It is where Banning Jainlight goes in that same novel, first to beg forgiveness of the woman he raped, then to die. It is where Billy from *The Sea Came in at Midnight* comes to drink away his memories of working on a fake pornographic snuff film that went on to influence real ones. As seen with Billy and Llewellyn, the creative risks we take – the chases we embark upon to snatch the Dream – can destroy us. Davenhall Island is a place beyond the America where people have

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<sup>32</sup> This island appears in *Tours of the Black Clock*, *Arc d’X*, *The Sea Came in at Midnight* and *Our Ecstatic Days*.



dreams/ambitions. It is a place of limbo, a metaphorical manifestation of the empty terminus that is the broken promise of America. It is where people come to die, either physically or spiritually. These people don't come to Davenhall to renounce their American citizenship, they come to remove themselves from the race. They are no longer chasing their dreams. As Spinks writes, "Erickson suggests that American identity is always involved in a reciprocal relationship with apocalypse, death, or an experience of the limit that these terms represent" (Spinks 220). Davenhall is the fictive representation of the limit of those terms. Davenhall Island, on the other side of the Rubicon, is one of the more memorable creations in Erickson's fictive landscape. It is not America but it has everything to do with America.

The ever-shifting Rubicon River also allows Erickson to metaphorsize frontierism and western expansion in America.<sup>33</sup> This psychic frontierism often takes the form of social transgression – Louise and Billy's snuff film, Sally paying her way West by selling her body – but it also a new way of thinking about America as an idea or dream and not the terra firma beneath Americans' feet. If the final American frontier is indeed in the minds of Americans, then Erickson's insistence that America is only a dream becomes more credible. Erickson's psychic frontierism is a metaphor for what he sees as the moral decline of American society and politics. He loathed Reagan in the 1980s for having the first "overtly ideological" White House (Erickson "The 9/11 President" n.pag.). He criticized the religious Right in the 1990s for drawing distinctions between itself and

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<sup>33</sup> In this way, the Rubicon serves the same strategic purpose as the American highway in Erickson.

other Americans via exclusive rhetoric,<sup>34</sup> and he has recently railed against the military boosterism among that same religious Right which is further dividing the country:

I never thought I'd live long enough to see a debate in the United States Senate over whether it's all right for America to torture people. Not so long ago that question would have been considered beyond the pale no matter what your politics were. Not so long ago we were supposed to be better than that. I'm exactly the traitor to Ann Coulter's America that she claims I am, because I've never believed in her America.<sup>35</sup>  
(“Next Stop, Zeroville” n.pag.)

Erickson recognizes the America that Ann Coulter is coming from; and he rejects it. That Coulter has her own version of America and Erickson has his is hardly surprising, given how far apart they stand on the political spectrum, but even Erickson’s own mother has an America that her son cannot participate in. In an article published last year, Erickson relates how he and his mother talk at cross purposes about their own versions of America: “In the same way that my mother and I aren’t even talking about the same Obamacare when we talk about Obamacare, we’re not talking about the same Barack Obama when we talk about Obama” (“Conversations With My Mother” n.pag.). They cannot relate to each other’s Americas. But Erickson’s private America doesn’t just differ from Ann Coulter’s or his mother’s. It differs from every other American’s, and these differences, however minor, are freighted by felt experience:

[T]he occupational hazard of being of my country [is] the way one's identity becomes bound up with a landscape that manifests in its soil and psychitecture an

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<sup>34</sup> Examples of exclusive rhetoric include “the talk at the 1992 Republican National Convention about Real Americans and other Americans” or “James Watt’s jocularly of the early Eighties that there are two kinds of people, Americans and liberals” (American Nomad 14; 36).

<sup>35</sup> Ann Coulter is a controversial right-wing political commentator and author.

idea, with a people still fighting over who they are because when nothing else is held in common but the idea then if the idea isn't held in common there's nothing left except the mystical name of the place that evokes something different for each person but which each person allows himself or herself to believe is the same thing evoked for every other person. (Erickson *These Dreams of You* 264)

Erickson's fiction disrupts "the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress" (Bhabha 1) by declaring repeatedly that America (and therefore notions of "progress") means different things to different people. Success in America depends as much on "the terminology by which success might be defined" as anything else ("Conversations With My Mother" n.pag.), and the very definition of America depends on the person defining it.

The Reagan years are a good example of how the notion of a private America was unconsciously absorbed into the national psyche. Ronald Reagan's election, roundly acknowledged as a coup for conservative values and their entrenchment, did not bring Americans together so much as create the conditions for citizens' private Americas. Reagan's presidency demonstrated "a concerted emphasis on the robust assertion of American identity" which thereby created the conditions for "a number of 'secret' or private Americas, utopian spaces for the private citizen to experience the 1980s as the 1950s" (Spinks 222).<sup>36</sup> Indeed, even now in popular culture, the 1980s are remembered through a 1950s lens, as seen in the cookie-cutter suburban houses and conservative values of *Freaks and Geeks*, the solemn dinner-table religiosity parodied in the music

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<sup>36</sup> In *American Nomad*, Erickson offers the theory that Reagan's vague-yet-calculated everyman image made these private Americas possible, a strategy that a more ferocious Republican like Pat Buchanan would fail at in 1996 because he was too rhetorically specific: "as he spoke to his own uncompromising vision of America...he made it more and more impossible for other people to hold onto their dreams of America, and he was thereby killing America, scalding word by scalding word" (22).

video for Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It," and the hollow cultural nostalgia of films like *Diner* and *The Fabulous Baker Boys*. If "memory itself is a country" (*Leap Year* 33), it must be difficult for Americans to know whether to trust their memories because they do not know whether they are remembering the actual America (if one exists) or the America of their imagination. Erickson uses this confusion to his advantage in his fiction, so that the scarred landscapes of his private America resemble the scarred landscapes of his own psyche. Indeed, as Larry McCaffery writes:

[W]hat has not yet been recognized by reviewers or critics is the degree to which Erickson has used his setting, characters, and plot materials as a means of metaphorizing, exorcizing and otherwise projecting outward aspects of his own psyche, a region of blasted hopes, confusion, idealism, self-lacerating guilt, and perpetual isolation. (McCaffery 396-397)

That last point on isolation emphasizes the nature of Erickson's works, and his prose so profoundly captures the experience of isolation that James Brusseau used portions of *Days Between Stations* to demonstrate – by analyzing the silences in a conversation between Michel, Jason and Lauren – how alone the individual can be in a room full of people (*Isolated Experiences* 114). When a writer's work becomes material for philosophical treatises on the nature of isolation, it is safe to presume that writer knows how to be alone.

Because of the fluid nature of dreams, and the dreamy quality of Erickson's work, he rarely espouses a fixed idea of anything – not America, not weather, not geography. He resists the idea of home as a stable, unchanging place. If America dreams itself, and the dream changes over time, then any given Americans' sense of home changes over

time, because their home is America. Marc in *Tours of the Black Clock* operates a ferry on the Rubicon from mainland America to Davenhall Island.<sup>37</sup> Being the sole ferryman on the river, he takes a relaxed attitude toward work – to the frequent chagrin of his clientele. One man, furious at a delay, tells Marc that ““people should have a right to go back where they came from.”” ““Not on my river”” is Marc’s reply (*Tours of the Black Clock* 24). Again, Erickson is working with metaphor here. His characters never return to the same place because even if they *do* return, both they and the place have changed.<sup>38</sup> “It seems as though the sea’s become much wider or the world more distant from itself” muses Banning Jainlight, sailing home to America after twenty years in Europe, “or perhaps it’s that home, or anything resembling home, must, in my return to it, seem more unapproachable” (*Tours of the Black Clock* 292). Jainlight knows that he has changed more drastically than America has in his absence, yet America still seems more alien to him than himself because he did not bear witness to its evolution. The America he remembers exists only in his mind, because “memory itself is a country” (*Leap Year* 33).

Erickson deals in dreams (and the word “dream” here covers a wide range of meanings, from individual aims like Llewellyn’s screenwriting aspirations, to national imaginings of a singular America, to the highly specific myths and narratives that serve as pillars to the general Dream of America), which imbues his work with the tone and quality of myth. As Kathy Acker writes, “myth is history that does not exclude the realms of imagination, dreaming, desiring. A myth is history that comes from those humans who have not severed heart from brain” (“It Was Hitler’s Pornographer” n.pag.). Indeed,

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<sup>37</sup> Marc seems to be one of the few of Erickson’s characters immune to the cataclysmic effects of the Rubicon.

<sup>38</sup> This attitude can, again, be traced back to Erickson’s origins. He once went to visit his childhood home and saw it had been bulldozed to make room for a freeway. The old pool remained, but it now belonged to the next-door neighbours (“I Was A Teenage Conservative” n.pag.).

Erickson's writing has the power and quality of myth while working to deconstruct a myth as equally powerful but much older – the myth/dream of America. His strange geography is his own inner dream, but it serves as a metaphorical platform from which Erickson comments on the dreams of Americans as well as the Dream of America.

### **The Dream of America**

Dreams are, by their very nature, private. Dreams feel original to the dreamer, despite the fact that almost everybody dreams. Dreams are often baffling and occasionally violent, but they are unequivocally ours. It is difficult to explain a dream to someone without boring them. One cannot properly convey the terror of a nightmare because the terror, like the dream, is private. Therefore Erickson does not presume that the contours and qualities and details of the dream are the same for all Americans, or even recognizably similar:

We've always assumed that the America of our dreams is the same place, but it isn't anymore and maybe never was and never could have been, because in a way distinct from other nations, America is an act of imagination, and imagination never exists collectively; it exists singularly. (Erickson "The 9/11 President" n.pag.)

This claim demonstrates Erickson's tendency to read selectively (the document he is referencing is the Declaration of Independence), but it also reinforces Erickson's above-quoted Declaration of Imagination on the teachers who wrongfully accused him of plagiarism. Imagination creates both writers and nations.

In *Amnesiascope*, Erickson mentions that his father never had a dream (dream in this specific example meaning a life's ambition) until the last fifteen years of his life,

when he realized that his dream was the life he had already lived.<sup>39</sup> Fearful that the same thing would happen to him, Erickson worries about “how one makes peace with the passing of his dreams, or how those dreams are displaced by ones at once less grand and more full, at once more ordinary but no less profound” (*Amnesiascope* 197). Although this profound-but-ordinary life should be satisfying, in its own way, Erickson’s as-yet-unfulfilled ambition to be a well-known American writer still gnaws at him. “I live in the shadow of my own life” (*Amnesiascope* 199), he admits, sounding not a little like Llewellyn, the screenwriter from *Rubicon Beach*. Indeed, if Americans are “slaves of their dreams,” neither Llewellyn nor Erickson is a tragic exception (*Leap Year* 138). Erickson may claim to be an American Nomad, but he never claimed to be un-American, and he has his American dreams like everyone else.

In his review of *Rubicon Beach*, novelist/journalist Michael Ventura writes that “[t]o have a dream – as individuals, as lovers, or as a country – is to subject yourself to the law that your very dream will reach out to destroy you if you fail its demands” (Ventura “Phantasmal America” n.pag.). In Erickson, a dream destroys itself if it doesn’t come true. When his hand closed on air in an attempt to grasp it, Erickson realized that the dream would never be his, and so set the dreamscape of his America on fire, if not for literary revenge, then to depict the danger of dreaming. His private America has both “the utter innocence and the profound danger of secret life” (*Amnesiascope* 138).

In *Rubicon Beach*, Cale is beset by dreams of a woman brutally decapitating a man. One night he wakes from this dream to find an alarming amount of blood everywhere and a crew of policemen standing around – “it was a dream,” he protests.

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<sup>39</sup> There are many other subtle references to the green light behind Gatsby in Erickson’s work.

“It was a dream that bleeds,” answers the detective (37). What Erickson does with time, in his assertion that it ticks to the clock of memory and not the clock of hours and minutes, he does with the private dream of his own America (and in doing so implies the existence and validation of every American’s private America, and, further still, the dreams had of America by anyone who has ever heard of America). However, despite acknowledging them, he does not claim to know anything about other people’s private Americas. He is far too immersed in his own.<sup>40</sup> His life’s ambition was to become a widely read and widely appreciated American writer. As he relates in *Amnesiascope*, just getting published was such a struggle that he assumed, once it finally happened, everything else about the dream would naturally follow.<sup>41</sup> After the initial victory of publication, the Dream still eluded him. Erickson briefly considers quitting writing toward the end of the novel, but finally admits that chasing the Dream is too irresistible: “having tried one last time, perhaps I will try once more” (225).

The emphasis on isolation in Erickson’s books can sometimes make them seem like they belong more to him than the reader. Though he may truck in universal themes, his idiosyncratic approach occasionally “blurs them and turns the universality that Erickson aims at, and sometimes achieves, into something oddly narcissistic and private” (Eder “Jefferson and Hemings” n.pag.). His personal approach to recurring themes and motifs, bolstered by his frequent use of dream sequences, can occasionally make the reader feel as if he has stumbled into a room where a distressed man is carrying on a bitter argument with himself. He also occasionally slips a little too easily into defeatism

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<sup>40</sup> “I never meant to be anybody’s dream but my own” (*Tours of the Black Clock* 241).

<sup>41</sup> “I don’t know why, five novels later, it didn’t happen. Any conjecture would only sound graceless, bitter, self-justifying. I’ve seriously considered the most obvious answer, that I was never as good as I hoped or wanted to believe. That the Dream was fantastic relative to what my talent really was” (*Amnesiascope* 150).



(“he had failed in his pursuit because he had deserved to fail”) but for the most part the writing hits its mark, which is to capture the tone of elegy and the texture of dreams (*The Sea Came in at Midnight* 188). The dreamlike quality of his narratives can never be quite shaken, even when Erickson takes generic turns into historical fiction. “The sentences that form Mr. Erickson's myth are often ambiguous,” writes Kathy Acker, “for they can never decide between dream and historical actuality” (“It Was Hitler’s Pornographer” n.pag.). Yet they *do* decide. Erickson frequently eschews historical actuality for oneiric imaginative conceit – conceit which he surely believes results in a wider truth. In *Tours of the Black Clock*, an American named Banning Jainlight is hired to write erotica for Adolf Hitler. The object of female desire in Jainlight’s pulp porn is Geli Raubal – an actual historical figure alleged by historians to be the only person Hitler ever truly loved. The dictator is so rejuvenated by this literature that he rethinks his military strategy, makes peace with the Soviet Union, and declares a war on the United States that lasts the remainder of the Twentieth Century. In the battle between dreaming and historical actuality, Erickson has unambiguously jettisoned the latter. He is obsessed with the private inner dream that builds his fictive worlds, the private dream of America, and the private dreams of sleep.

In *America*, Baudrillard writes that “seduction requires a secret” (Baudrillard 7). In *Leap Year*, Erickson writes that “everyone has his secret America” (Erickson 92). Erickson is seduced by his own secret America, which is why it enrages and entralls him. Secrets require a withholding of something – and what America withholds is its own promise. This idea is often metaphorically employed in Erickson’s fiction through the motif of the endlessly ringing phone or the unanswered letter, fictive manifestations of

the dream's refusal to answer its dreamer.<sup>42</sup> In *Rubicon Beach*, there is a black telephone in a yellow phone booth three hundred yards from the house Cale grew up in. Often, as a child, he heard it ringing but ignored it, because on the few occasions he *did* answer there was nobody on the other end. "By the time I was eighteen," he notes, "I thought I'd outgrown the sound of telephone calls that weren't for me" (*Rubicon Beach* 31). The night he leaves home forever he hears the phone ringing again, picks it up, hears silence – silence, but *inhabited* silence – and knows that the person on the other end is dying. Twenty years later, living as a prisoner in a library tower far above a zombie Los Angeles, he realizes the caller was Catherine – a woman he has been dreaming of his whole life: "It was you, wasn't it. It was you on the other end of that line when I picked up that telephone out in the middle of nowhere twenty years ago, out in America" (*Rubicon Beach* 89). Like Jack, who "should have crossed that river," Cale should have picked up the phone earlier. If only he had done so, he may have spent some time with his dream lover Catherine. "Sometimes one must live half a lifetime before he understands the silences of half a lifetime before" (*Rubicon Beach* 89). This is the irrevocability of decisions. This is classic Erickson, and these are classic Erickson characters. The dream eludes them.

In *Our Ecstatic Days*, Tank Man from the famous Tiananmen Square photograph has grown up and is reluctantly commanding a military revolution in America somewhere outside "Occupied Albuquerque". He does not wish to be the leader of the movement and wishes for an ordinary domestic life. At night, in order to escape the pressure of his days, he writes sexually submissive letters to a dominatrix whom he loves, unaware that she

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<sup>42</sup> Unanswered phones ring throughout *Rubicon Beach* and *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, and unanswered letters represent irrevocable decisions in *Tours of the Black Clock* and *Our Ecstatic Days*.

has moved. She represents the fulfillment of his sexual and domestic desires, and of course, she never replies to him. The dream goes unanswered. Another unanswered letter in *Arc d'X* gives closure to a love triangle begun three novels earlier in *Days Between Stations* between Lauren, Jason and Michel. After the former dies, her adopted daughter Kara receives a letter in the mail from Michel, addressed to Lauren. The letter is brief: "I'm waiting" (*Arc d'X* 105). While this may sound trite, for anyone following Erickson since his debut, the revelation is devastating. Lauren chose the philandering Jason against Michel (and against her better judgment), and when Jason dies shortly afterward (someone blows up a Federal building and he is caught in the blast), she waits the rest of her life to hear from Michel. Lauren's daughter Kara does not know who Michel is but she does realize, after reading the letter, that "whoever was out there waiting for Lauren would now wait forever, and for Kara it was something like a child's first understanding that everyone dies, this lesson of how love can wait in the heart unanswered" (*Arc d'X* 105). Erickson dangles love or happiness or stability in front of his characters but never truly lets them grasp it. He withholds closure and happiness the way America withholds its dream, but – ever the romantic – he still finds value and meaning in the quest. Both Brian Evenson and Larry McCaffery have noted this unabashedly romantic streak of Erickson's, particularly in the way his characters struggle and how "this struggle is linked to effort to find love and some source of personal security in a world whose spatial and temporal coordinates have become warped by psychological forces as well as those of technologically driven change" (McCaffery 397). Both conclude that, just as his originality keeps him out of the sci-fi or fantasy genres, his romanticism bars him from membership in the postmodern club.

In *Camera Lucida*, postmodernist Roland Barthes insists that a photograph does not certify what *is*, and only “*what has been*” (Barthes 85, italics his). According to Barthes, Americans take photographs at face value; they place an inordinate amount of faith in the image. Indeed, he believes America to be a nation obsessed with images (*Camera Lucida* 85). “Consider the United States,” he writes, “where everything is transformed into images. Only images exist and are produced and consumed” (*Camera Lucida* 118). Baudrillard makes a similar observation in *America*, that “the image of America becomes imaginary for Americans themselves” (Baudrillard 125). Though a little hyperbolic, these statements are not wholly unfounded. America is certainly “imageable”, in the Lynchian sense (Lynch “The Image of the City” 10). The Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the Sears Tower, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Grand Canyon, and Mount Rushmore are all images that spring to mind when one thinks of what America looks like. And America is also imagistic, in that it feverishly produces and reproduces images of itself, from printing the faces of long-dead presidents on dollar bills to planting the American flag on the moon. Of course, as immigrants to America are forever finding out, the difference between familiarity with the images of America and familiarity with America *itself* is vast (if it is even possible to know a “general” America outside one’s private one).

“What characterizes the so-called advanced societies,” Barthes continues, “is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs” (Barthes 118-119). He is presumably including America in this list of “so-called advanced societies” but it is unfair and inaccurate to say Americans have traded their beliefs for images. They have done no such thing. Rather, images represent their beliefs. A dream is a succession

of images that provoke an emotional response in the dreamer, therefore Americans' belief in images is also belief in the dream. For example, if an advertisement is a "demonstration of the operation of culture" (Baudrillard "The Ecstasy of Communication" 130), and much of American advertising demonstrates the various potentialities of upward mobility, then the Dream of America hides within advertisements' scenes of tranquil domesticity. In *Leap Year*, Erickson recounts a dinner conversation that revolved around the Pledge of Allegiance. A handful of "liberal Democrats" at the table argued that whoever won the 1988 elections should salute the flag, not the Constitution. "The Constitution," said one diner angrily, "is only a document, the flag is a *symbol*" (*Leap Year* 160). "[T]he symbol of America was more important to the dinner conversationalists than the authentic definition of America itself," Erickson concludes (*Leap Year* 160).

But the symbol does not have to be inanimate; public figures can symbolize of the Dream of America too. Every day, millions of Americans watch an athletic ruling class perform feats of strength and guile on football fields and baseball diamonds and basketball courts, because these players represent either the faded varsity dreams of the individual viewer or the communal dream of future championships, or both. Americans' belief in both the image and what it represents is how America is dreamed. It is not a trade-off between image and belief. It is an amalgamation. Pop stars – who also represent the dreams of their listeners in the same the way athletes represent the dreams of their supporters – sing their songs to "secret audiences of the American heart" (*Leap Year* 30), and everyone hears something a little different. Posters of LeBron James or Derek Jeter or Bruce Springsteen or Miley Cyrus on the bedroom walls of America demonstrate

Americans' unwavering belief in the images that represent the Dream. The belief in images is the process by which the Dream of America is made.

### **Victory Culture and Dreams of Defeat**

Despite their connotations of obliviousness and illusion, Erickson frequently reiterates that the potential malevolence of dreams does not diminish their utility. He knows that they make us who we are, knows that “the dreams that sustain us...sustain history” (*Tours of the Black Clock* 241). Dreams are private and have little meaning or interest to those who did not dream them, and even Erickson himself – an admitted dealer in dreams – confesses to being bored by other people’s dreams. However, though dreams are private because they involve either ambition tailored to personal taste/goals or are comprised of fragments of a single subconscious, Erickson proposes the idea that nightmares might be different. Despite the fact that one cannot convey the fear of a bad or violent dream, a collective nightmare of the future can be shared. Indeed, it is fitting that a Cold War kid would think so. The MAD Doctrine gave an entire generation nightmares not of a world run by the Red Army, but of no world at all (Engelhardt 55). Living in an age of possible nuclear Armageddon inculcated Erickson’s generation with a shared fear that perversely bonded them together and gave their lives a particular kind of meaning. Because nuclear war is another example of moving beyond that which has previously been known, Erickson returns to his metaphorical rubicon, writing that “[o]n this beach, we stay alive by the mutuality of our nightmares” (qtd. in “Phantasmal America” n.pag.). The fear of mutually assured destruction prevented nuclear war and ensured the survival of the species. Erickson is presumably asserting that a shared fear is more universal than a dream, particularly if the object of fear is as monolithic as the Soviet Union, or as

indiscriminate as a nightmarish weapon that cannot make distinctions between good guys (Americans) and bad guys (non-Americans).

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine America without peripherally imagining the huddled crowds who stand outside it – the non-Americans or the un-Americans – those who are either targets of America or irrelevant to it. This idea is connected to “Victory Culture”, which is yet another manifestation of the Dream of America. In writing of Victory Culture, Engelhardt is referring to the post-WWII rhetorical tendency in America to make “war and victory...synonymous” (Engelhardt 64). But as Vietnam, and Korea before it, demonstrated, such was no longer the case. Victory Culture was a particular kind of airy belief, a dream, if you will. What helped its cultivation is the fact that war always took place in distant lands. The last war to truly take place on American soil (not counting Pearl Harbor, which was an isolated surprise attack) was the one America fought against itself – the Civil War. The far-off battlefields of war register in American consciousness only as images borne toward them from television or newspapers or the Internet.

Like other boys his age, Engelhardt dreamt the dream of victory culture. He writes that *Rocky Mountain* was his first “horror film” because it was the first movie he’d seen in which the certainty of American victory was left ambiguous. Such a thing, writes Engelhardt, had never occurred to him. Obliviousness to disaster is one of the central conceits of victory culture, and is essentially American. Erickson, who was nearly drafted himself, understands this. Having been stationed safely offshore and escaped from Vietnam unscathed, Jason from *Days Between Stations* experiences “no real sense of relief, because he wasn’t wise enough to understand he could die. It never occurred to

him” (10). Note the similar expressions of obliviousness by both Jason and Engelhardt. The latter’s prose even reads a little like Erickson’s in his epiphany: “[t]hat the cavalry might not arrive, that the surrounded, embattled self might not be saved, that the Other might storm and retake history’s central staging ground, that we might lose and be eradicated from this earth had not previously been imagined” (Engelhardt 71). The rest of Engelhardt’s book goes on to detail the decline of Victory Culture in an unmistakably elegiac voice. Such is the disillusionment of the American dreamer whose dream has shattered.

Ever the outsider, Erickson also resisted the hippie movement. As America entered the summer of love and student protests became general and/or fashionable, Erickson was having none of it. He found the thin Marxism espoused by friends silly, and he thought free love was irresponsible. He did not take part in any protests (*Leap Year* 152). One might argue that his obligations as a socially conscious citizen should have overridden the need of the artist within to have his individual voice recognized, or that if a given collective thought or sentiment is a good one, then there is nothing wrong with one’s submission to it (unless Erickson has a problem with being consumed by the submission itself). Yet this is a paradox of Erickson’s. He knows that it takes the many to affect change but won’t give up his status as the haunted loner, watching from the fringes of America as the pillars crumble.

As Cale from *Rubicon Beach* reflects upon being asked to join a political cadre: “I distrusted being one of something; I knew it wasn’t real, I knew the only oneness that was real was my own, being one of me” (40). In *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*, Erickson even avoids the crucial primaries and big conventions in his election coverage books,



attempting instead to find pockets of America where something else matters, something that will speak to a larger, not eternal but more enduring America. He is a loner, and so are his characters. His characters do not fraternize, and neither does he. Why cling to this outsider status? Perhaps he does it to absolve himself of responsibility if America collapses. Or perhaps he does it because he felt he never truly belonged to America anyway. Yet again, paradoxically, this does not mean that he does not love America: “How much easier it would be, to be a man who doesn’t love his country” (*Leap Year* 192). His stubborn belief remains because, in the Ericksonian universe, where sandstorms swallow cities and storms blight whole prairies, the only thing holding anyone’s lives together is belief (whether belief in love, or revenge, or simply belief in survival). His private America is a reflection of his belief in and disillusionment with America. As McCaffery notes, “[Erickson’s] fiction thus becomes a kind of magical looking glass reflecting back to himself and his readers a dark, troubling, but extraordinarily vivid self-portrait of an artist struggling to strike through the mask of illusion and self-deception and uncover the real” (McCaffery 397). Erickson is too private to subscribe to that which is communal. Therefore, however screamingly vulgar America might become culturally, however corrupt America may become politically, Erickson will still love it without feeling obliged to, even if he only loves what he thinks it once was and not what it really was. Even if he will never love what it continues to become.

As mentioned earlier, the nature of Erickson’s prose and personality resists generic categorization, and this too is related to his reluctance to associate with crowds. Despite having published articles in science fiction magazines, and despite the decidedly sci-fi atmosphere of both *Arc d’X* and *Rubicon Beach*, Erickson himself dismisses his

involvement in the genre, saying “no hard-core science-fiction fan would consider me a science-fiction writer, since the basic concern of most classic science-fiction is the relationship between man and technology” (“An Interview With Steve Erickson” 397). Moreover, as McCaffery himself notes, “the nightmarish dystopias that recur in Erickson’s novels are not SF trappings but literalizations of his sense that the ideals of the American Dream have withered in the harsh desert of the real” (McCaffery 396). And despite whiffs of high fantasy in some of his books, they are “not fantastic because they’re not characterized by the sense of wonder that fantasy evokes” (McCaffery 398). Erickson refuses even to share his books with genres. He writes and dreams alone.

### **Conclusion**

“One of the best compliments I ever got,” Erickson has stated in an interview, “was a woman telling me she was driving along one day and flashed upon this dream she’d had, and after a minute or two she realized it wasn’t a dream, it was my book” (Rifkin “Soul Survivor” n.pag.). The quote neatly demonstrates what Erickson aims at with his writing. In pursuit of his dream to be an original American writer he uses oneiric narrative techniques to recreate the quality of dreams – and he does all this while musing about the nature of the American Dream. He sends out fictive drones to do the work for him. The detectives who roam the mazes of Erickson’s world are inspecting the Dream of America. The way Erickson weaves the political with the personal is how he deals with loss both personal and political. His private America therefore serves a therapeutic purpose. It is an America where the roads go where he writes them, and where mythical police-state cities of the American imagination can be controlled by a single man with a

dream of his own.<sup>43</sup> Lee Spinks has noted Erickson's "fascination with the apocalyptic structure of the American origin" (Spinks 215), and suggests that his recurring apocalypse has to do with paying deference to the chaotic bloodletting (the massacre of the American Indian) that spawned the country. Indeed, much of Erickson's disillusionment with his country has to do with its insistence on innocence. As will be explored in the following chapter, one of America's principal architects, Thomas Jefferson, was a man who spoke against slavery while keeping slaves – a historical fact which dashes any notion of primordial American innocence, though many believe those revolutionary times were somehow purer. "The privileging of the revolutionary origin of America as a clean break with the past in 1776 has been particularly important in allowing many different groups and individuals to relate to the official story," writes John Agnew in *American Space/American Place*, "because it suggests potential for present and future inclusion as opposed to an actual history of exclusion, discrimination, and domination" (7). This "official story" and the potential it suggests only exists as a relational thing, a thing in defiance of reality. The story and the potential it implies is the Dream of America.

Northrop Frye famously declared "where is here?" (232) to be the essential Canadian question. Burdened by our association with wilderness and at the mercy of nature, Canadians could only survive while Americans, who lived in more forgiving latitudes, explored the land and forged their identities, creating the legends that continue to sustain their writers, filmmakers, and dreamers. The American question, "Who am I?" implied an attendant quest, while the Canadian question "Where is here?" implies

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<sup>43</sup> Etcher from *Arc d'X* who steals every volume of *the Unexpurgated Volumes of Unconscious History* and holds them ransom for a window in his office, returning one page at a time to the priests who run Aenopolis.

disorientation and paints a picture of grim endurance. Supposedly, Canadians were too busy evading death by nature to have the luxury of asking cerebral questions. But can a riddle like Frye's be so proprietarily nationalistic, especially one so vague? Surely not, for it is Erickson's unspoken query to the reader in each of his books, beginning with the desolate Kansan plains of *Days Between Stations* and riding down the American highway from there.

The question does not make Erickson an honorary Canadian (though I am sure we would love to have him) but rather, an American outsider. He is not so elitist to assume his above-average intelligence makes him alone in America. What makes him alone in America is that he no longer knows what it is, where it is, or if it ever was. In a corpus where even something as common as the measurement of time is private, it is logically consistent that Erickson has his own private America. The chief way that this attitude finds utterance in his novels is in his barely recognizable geographies. However, Erickson does not ignore the places beyond the borders of America, and when his novels ask Big Questions, they ask universal ones, such as "Where in the universe am I?" (*Tours of the Black Clock* 247) or "What's missing from the world?" (*The Sea Came in at Midnight* 157). Just as Frye's famous question can be applied to non-Canadian cultural productions, Erickson's novels deal with universal themes, even while using particular American faces and places to do so. Joyce explained his obsession with Dublin by claiming "in the particular is contained the universal" (Ellman 505). As Erickson demonstrates in his work, dreaming is universal, but dreams are particular.

The formative, isolating humiliation caused by his stuttering forged Erickson's fiercely original authorial vision, and the dreamscapes of his fictional America are

manifestations of his conviction that America is a dream, not a place and that the American Dream is as intangible as the dreams of sleep. If this is Erickson's assertion, then the material prosperity promised by the American Dream is paradoxical in the contradiction that something intangible promises tangible goods. This problematic contradiction will be examined in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four

### The Pursuit of Happiness: An American Paradox

*I've invented something. As the germ of conception in my head it was the best and wildest and most elusive of my inventions. It's a contraption half-crazed by a love of justice, a machine oiled by fierce hostility to those who would ride the human race as though it were a dumb beast. I've set it loose gyrating across the world. It spins through villages, hamlets, towns, grand cities. It's a thing to be confronted every moment of every day by everyone who hears even its rumor: it will test most those who presume too glibly to believe in it. But I know it's a flawed thing, and I know the flaw is of me. Just as the white ink of my loins has fired the inspiration that made it, so the same ink is scrawled across the order of its extinction. The signature is my own. I've written its name. I've called it America.*

– Steve Erickson's Thomas Jefferson in *Arc d'X*

This chapter will evaluate the relationship between the Jeffersonian paradox of America as identified by Erickson and the contradictions present in his own work. As with Chapter Three, it will consider the relationship between an extra-textual problem – in this case the paradox that is America – and its manifestation in Erickson's work, but it will pay sharper attention to Erickson's non-fiction and his own political experiences. The paradoxical themes Erickson grapples with emphasize the paradox of America and of American identity – identity that is “continually produced by the tension between a number of irreconcilable positions” (Spinks 223). Though he spends most of his pages worrying about them, Erickson does not advocate for a reconciliation of the antinomies that define America; he does not believe such a thing is possible. Even attempting reconciliation, he warns, could be dangerous and disruptive to the idea that America is.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the apocalyptic atmosphere of Erickson's fiction, in which the monuments of civilization, “though intended to endure in quasi-perpetuity,” ultimately “[reveal their] “brittleness” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 24) is a deliberate narrative strategy. Omitted from Chapter Three, however, is any

acknowledgment of the transmission of history – specifically of the fact that such transmission requires labour. Historical facts give the impression of being lastingly cemented, when in fact they are perpetually being processed. “The riches thus amassed in the aerarium of civilization henceforth appear as though identified for all time,” writes Benjamin. “This conception of history minimizes the fact that such riches owe not only their existence but also their transmission to a constant effort of society – an effort, moreover, by which these riches are strangely altered” (*Arcades Project* 14). History is not an accumulation of cemented facts; it is a process akin to dreaming. Erickson’s work calls attention to the difference between facts and remembrance, or, to put it more bluntly, between what happened and what we think happened.<sup>44</sup> While Chapter Three focused on the gulf between the reality of America and its promise – the gulf where the dream of America lives and breathes – this chapter is concerned with how America is burdened by its own paradoxical history to such a degree that these paradoxes now seem quintessentially American.

This chapter demonstrates the paradox inherent to Jefferson, to Erickson’s prose and Erickson himself, and to perceptions of the 1960s, Obama, and the Vietnam War, with the aim of showing definitively that these contradictions are not betrayals of America – they are America. The Dream or idea that is America is maintained by unconsciously misremembering the past, for an accurate appraisal of its own history would complicate the “official story” (Agnew 7) of America and condemn those who choose to believe it. Again, this misinterpretation is chiefly unconscious, a process akin to dreaming. Erickson believes that this blind acceptance of contradictory accounts of the

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<sup>44</sup> A lowly church clerk named Etcher literally rewrites History in *Arc d’X*, and in *Tours of the Black Clock*, the bomb-ravaged streets of Germany ring with the pre-recorded voice of Hitler, speaking as if he is still alive. These examples demonstrate Erickson’s awareness of the curated nature of history.

past is inherent to the operation of America and to the endurance of the American Dream. Taking his cue from America, he strategically employs paradox and a dreamy, surrealistic style to complicate a straightforward reading of his own stories.

There is an unconscious reluctance among some Americans to embark upon the intensive labour of disentangling history – many merely accept the historical narratives they have inherited. Some consciously ignore the past because “the only way to make the past usable is to misinterpret it, which means, strictly speaking, to lose it” (Menand 10). Regardless, any attempt to divorce fact from fiction would not just be disruptive, it would reduce the amount of energy required for the labour of processing and bequeathing history. For this reason, great as America might dream itself to be, “*we shall never resolve the enigma of the relation between the negative foundations of greatness and that greatness itself*” (Baudrillard 96, italics his). The inherent contradiction of America cannot be separated from America itself. There are differing reactions to this seemingly unsolvable riddle. Baudrillard enjoys it. “America is powerful and original; America is violent and abominable. We should not seek to deny either of these aspects,” he concludes, “nor reconcile them” (96). James Baldwin is less gleeful but offers no reconciliation either: “so many versions of the same myth are used for so many warring purposes,” he writes, “[w]hich America will you have?” (“Lockridge” 14). While Baudrillard observes the irreconcilable contradictions of America with impish glee, Erickson, like Baldwin, is characteristically dour in pointing them out. Not surprisingly, all three concur that contradiction is an elemental aspect of America.

### **Jefferson and The Pursuit of Happiness**

In *Arc d’X*, Erickson writes that the pursuit of happiness “is as ruthless as any



other” (*Arc d’X* 25). The sentence is a wickedly elegant amendment to Jefferson’s declaration, and stands as Erickson’s chief prosaic contribution to the paradox that is America. It is also perhaps the only sentence that comes close to summing up the weltanschauung of his entire oeuvre, since it gives utterance to the complicity between danger and happiness. In Jefferson’s America, “every day was dangerous and meant to be so” (*Leap Year* 50). While he has written extensively on other presidents, Jefferson is easily Erickson’s favourite commander-in-chief to worry about, seeing as he is both “creator and destroyer of the American dream” (Spinks 215). Jefferson embodies the primordial betrayal of America, while Jefferson’s slave-lover Sally Hemings represents “not only what America intended for itself but what it became” (*Leap Year* 91). In *Arc d’X*, Jefferson is a metaphor for America’s corruption and paradoxical morality, while Hemings embodies its still-simmering racial tensions. Erickson does not sentimentalize either of them, however, and the fact that he “avoids such a sentimental conclusion is due not only to his emphasis upon the rapacity of the Jeffersonian project, but also to his refusal to conceive of Jefferson as a narrowly ‘historical’ figure” (Spinks 219). Jefferson’s influence is still alive in America “in precisely those moments that have come to define our cultural modernity” (Spinks 220) such as the 1992 race riots or the O.J. Simpson trial. Moments that seem violent or anarchic are not aberrations from a default tranquility, they are part of America’s fabric, a fabric “flawed because it is built on the lie of human independence, defined by a man who cannot free his own slaves” (Elias 549). Bercovitch has noted the Jeffersonian paradox of America too: “Thus (in the notorious paradox of the Declaration of Independence), [Jefferson] could denounce servitude, oppression and inadequate representation, while concerning himself least (if at all) with

the most enslaved, oppressed, and inadequately represented groups in the land” (Bercovitch 84). The prosperity of the individual is guaranteed neither by God nor country. Only the pursuit is supposed to be assured, and this pursuit is not of itself a happy or even benevolent one. The abiding possibilities of America cannot be separated from the danger their pursuit entails, therefore moments of danger and violence in America are symptoms of its ambivalent architecture.

That America would inherit anything from Thomas Jefferson, even a quality as intangible as tension, is itself paradoxical since the man abhorred the practice of inheritance. Because it “sacrificed the interests of the living to the claims of the dead” (Spinks 217), Jefferson proposed a ground zero as far as inheritance was concerned. As Jefferson would have had it, each generation would start anew (or perhaps the proper word is destitute, to be financially honest about it) which is, in today’s America, an unabashedly apocalyptic idea. The man would be branded an un-American communist, or a conspiratorial crackpot. For proof of this one needs to look no further than the reaction to the piece “Wanted: American Radicals” published by James B. Conant in 1943 (Menand “The Long Shadow” 103). Conant, then the president of Harvard, raised the ire of his trustees and the public by penning a piece for the *Atlantic Monthly* that argued against the inheritance of wealth so that America might “prevent the growth of a caste system” (qtd. in Menand 103). Conant held on to his job only because he had expressed his views through the lens of some “hypothetical” American radical, but was dogged by suspicions of Communism for the rest of his life (Menand 103). His subsequent appointment to the position of high commissioner to Germany was nearly blocked by Senator McCarthy until President Eisenhower personally intervened on his behalf

(Menand 99). That a man espousing Jeffersonian ideals would be considered dangerous seems both appropriate and ludicrous, and such is the paradox of America. That Conant is remembered as both a timid academic administrator and the man who helped build the Bomb is also deliciously contradictory.

There are contradictions, it seems, everywhere one looks in America, and the contradictions of the past manifest themselves in the present. Aware of this, Erickson speculates on the alternate timelines of various political candidates in *Leap Year* and *American Nomad* – he explores the lost future of Bob Dole’s America, or Al Gore’s America, or even the lost Presidency of Bruce Babbitt, who “must remain satisfied with his place in history as one of the better Presidents we never had” (*Leap Year* 55). These are not futile exercises. Writing a book of election coverage that omits who actually got elected (*American Nomad*) and publishing it *after* the election is a testament to Erickson’s insistence that the potentialities of the past matter as much as the actualities of the present. Erickson does this not because he believes the abovementioned politicians actually became President in some other dimension, but because he believes that their respective Americas exist somewhere in today’s America, just like Thomas Jefferson’s America still exists in today’s America. In short, Jefferson lives because his contradictory consequences live. The irony of the reputation that Jefferson’s America has for its stern morality is not lost on Erickson, considering how much repressed lust was going on back then in “a landscape where it was considered more scandalous that Jefferson slept with a black woman than that he owned one” (“Next Stop, Zeroville” n.pag.). Put another way, “[i]f Sally had been free, the culture and society would not have accepted their relationship. But because Jefferson owned [Sally] as a slave, society turned its head”

(“An Interview With Steve Erickson” 411).

Just as paradox is still vital in America today, so is a shrill insistence on its lost innocence. This insistence is embodied in characters of much smaller consequence than Jefferson. For example, Erickson sees it in films as benign as *Forrest Gump*:

There certainly remains a lot of denial in America. The most popular movie of 1994 was one in which the quintessential American was portrayed as noble precisely for how dimwitted he was. Forrest Gump was a pretty neat manifestation of America’s ongoing struggle to hang on to this idea of itself as innocent. (McCaffery 406)

The notion of a once-virginal or innocent America is part of its mythology, and to believe it one must choose to ignore the fact that “the invention of America sprang from men of furious sexual torment” (*Leap Year* 33). It is well known that Jefferson had a secret slave mistress but, as Erickson points out, George Washington had his own secret Sally, and longed unrequited for the wife of George Fairfax (*Leap Year* 33). Alexander Hamilton was famously blackmailed by a prostitute (*Leap Year* 50). To this list one might add more contemporary philanderers, from JFK to the likes of Gary Hart and Bill Clinton, figures whose indiscretions were seized upon by the press and public alike as deviations from the purity of the office (or, in Hart’s case, aspirations of office). Erickson’s chief point about the indiscretions of America’s forefathers is that actual innocence, sexual or otherwise, was never part of America to begin with. As Erickson bitterly notes: “It was the nature of American freedom that [Jefferson] was only free to take his pleasure in something he possessed, in the same way it would ultimately be the nature of America to define itself in terms of what was owned” (*Arc d’X* 38). That America is misremembered to have been

innocent is simply another irreconcilable American paradox.

Regarding the seemingly irreconcilable positions of wanton sexuality and rigid morality, Erickson's claim that "politics is a manifestation of psychology and sexuality, rather than psychology being a manifestation of politics" ("An Interview With Steve Erickson" 405), asserts that the same urges that made the forefathers of America such effective politicians and orators also made them sexually ravenous. This may be hyperbolic, but Erickson's more conservative point that he considers "[Gary] Hart's reckless sexual behavior less dangerous than Nixon's reckless asexual behavior" (McCaffery 408), certainly seems fair. At least Hart's indiscretions can be said to have come from the mad confusion of passion and not from the strategic indiscretions of a backroom tactician who found himself wielding less power than he'd expected. Similarly shocked at his inability to affect change once elected, Jefferson cooled off on the slavery issue just when his influence was at its height, with the result that "his obsession for emancipation disintegrated into words without fire, he forsook the chance to change America as president and thus doomed America to its inclination to betray itself" (*Leap Year* 91). As far as Erickson is concerned, both Jefferson's best intentions and worst actions – as well as his tendency to waver at crucial moments – invented America, which is what makes him (and paradox) so integral to its genetic makeup.

### **"Which Is To Say" and Erickson's Paradoxical Fixation with the Sixties**

Erickson's prose oscillates between tough, noir-style dialogue and lyrical, almost purple descriptions. Appropriately, he cites Raymond Chandler and Jim Thompson as influences, but also Pynchon and Faulkner ("Steve Erickson" n.pag.). It is likely that he admires the former authors for their gritty dialogue and the latter for their virtuosic grand

style. But the gloomy, high-stakes atmosphere and razor sharp dialogue of the detective genre appeal to Erickson more than its linear narratives or procedural exposition. Indeed, Erickson is decidedly not of the minimalist school, and even dislikes Hemingway.<sup>45</sup> His prose is not sparse and halting. He is florid, not staid. The phrase “which is to say,” or slight variations, appears over thirty times throughout his oeuvre. This is not because he is an indecisive editor of his own writing. Rather, it is because he likes to express a sentiment, then go on to express a minor variation using different words, then another slight variation, then another, until all possible psychic consequences have been considered (similar to the way he likes to ponder the psychic consequences of certain political careers that never actually happened). Here is an example from *These Dreams of You*, in which Zan’s daughter Sheba ponders the meaning of the word America:

...loving the sound of it while despising everything it means that can’t be denied anyway because it’s imprinted on the modern gene which is to say that even as the girl pursues it, it’s already found her. (309)

Here is a passage from *American Nomad*, in which Erickson argues that sex is the last subversive act:

In an America that lusts for conformity and the iron hand, sex still lies just beyond authority’s reach, where it is still capable of severing the Moment from both past and future, which is to say from both history and prophecy, memory and expectation. (82)

Here is a scene from *Arc d’X*, in which Erickson attends to the writer’s eternal complaint that words are fatally inadequate:

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<sup>45</sup> A trip to France in *American Nomad* sees Erickson “rereading Hemingway for the first time in twenty years with new irritation” (151).

Etcher watched speechless and confused as his father disappeared through the bedroom door, with nothing more to be said between them – which is to say everything to be said between them. (110)

Following is a passage on the significance of rock and roll (and the tepid nature of contemporary American literature) from *Leap Year*:

...the great American authors of the nuclear imagination are those who wedded themselves to something more primitive than technology could touch...which is to say the great American novels of the past thirty-five years have had titles like Chuck Berry's *Greatest Hits* and *Blonde on Blonde* by Bob Dylan. (43)

Here Erickson's hints at the seedier side of Hollywood in *Amnesiascope*:

...the Hotel Hamblin was built by the studios to put up young studs and starlets shipped in from all over America for screen tests, which is to say it became a sort of private brothel for producers and casting agents. (4)

Here is some mathematical precision from *The Sea Came In At Midnight*:

...he noted that all the numbers of the code that preceded the coordinate were prime ones, which is to say numbers that could only be divided by themselves. (177)

Here is a passage on the claustrophobia that signals the end of romance in *Zeroville*:

He finds the air around her too thin to breathe anymore, which is to say he finds the air of his own dreams too thin to breathe. (93)

And finally, here is a scene from *Our Ecstatic Days* in which Kristen enters the Hotel of Thirteen Losses, each room embodying a specific type of loss:

...in the Room of Lost Youth there's a crack in the corner of one wall through

which a gale blows, disheveling the sheets on the furniture so that sometimes the Room of Lost Youth might take the form of the Room of Lost Health...which is to say one might enter the Room of Lost Youth early in life or late, age isn't a factor. (148)

The list could go on, but the point has been made. Erickson likes to write “which is to say”. But the phrase is not frivolous. It corresponds with his worldview. He insists upon the right to amend his own words. He avoids blanket statements or explicit declaratives. He rejects absolutes and resists the tidy compartmentalization of genre description just as he resists political affiliation. Erickson’s awareness of and irritation with the paradox of America dictates the content and contours of his work. And like Jefferson, Erickson himself has his seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. He abhors the Right and the Left with equal intensity:

Some of the left-wing ideologues I knew reminded me of the right-wing ideologues I knew, including the one I had known best: me. The extent to which ideology hijacks independent thought, refracting an issue through the lens of an already-settled bias, was all the more disturbing for how long it took me to see it. (“I Was A Teenage Conservative” n.pag.)

Accordingly, Erickson argues that women’s right to abortion does not mean the state has an obligation to pay for them in the same sense that the right to bear arms does not oblige the government to buy a man a gun or freedom of speech requires the state to buy a man a printing press (*Leap Year* 159). He insists upon the right to stake a political middle ground between the left and the right.

In his political commentary for *The American Prospect*, he explains his neutrality



by arguing that both the Left and the Right have “perverse investments” (“Conversations With My Mother” n.pag.), in that the Right wish to see Obamacare fail just as badly as the Left wished to see the Iraq war turn into a debacle (despite the fact that a debacle required the senseless deaths of thousands of American soldiers – a deadly game whose winners got to say *we told you so*). By his own recollection, Erickson would have voted for Goldwater in 1964 and Nixon in 1968 if he were old enough to cast a ballot (*Leap Year* 4). When he reached the age of majority, he was for McGovern in 1972, for Carter in 1976, for John Anderson in 1980 and for Mondale in 1984 (*Leap Year* 4). Remarking on his brief tenure as a hippie in college, he declares that “the liberalism of the time was as smug as the conservatism of the future would be sanctimonious” (“I Was A Teenage Conservative” n.pag.). As noted above, he rejects the arguments of both sides of the abortion issue. Despite his ostensibly rigorous social conscience, he avoids protests because they demand “submission to a collective thought or sentiment” (*Leap Year* 152).<sup>46</sup> Erickson is a loner, even if being so means being contradictory.

There are many other contradictions to Erickson’s personality. He is a creative writing teacher (at the California Institute of the Arts) who dislikes the collaborative nature of such courses, insisting that writing is a solitary act (“The Further I’m Away” n.pag.). He has expressed a desire for a wider readership, yet his last novel with a major publishing house (2005’s *Our Ecstatic Days* for Simon & Schuster) is by a large margin

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<sup>46</sup> Occasionally, this means that Erickson’s characters become surrogate mouthpieces for his own views. Here’s Louise from *The Sea Came in at Midnight*: “[a]s an intense young philosophy student of the Sixties attending college...she had never been sure whether she truly believed that the protests of the time missed some larger point, or that the self-righteousness of it all just bored the shit out of her” (115).

his most obfuscatory.<sup>47</sup> He uses the political freedom his country promises him, and writes fiercely about the importance of sexual freedom while opposing abortion, sneers at book critics despite being a veteran film reviewer, and laments the dearth of strong female characters in literature despite the fact that most of his female characters are vaguely drawn, quasi-mythical, hyper-sexualized beings.<sup>48</sup> He insists on the right to be as contradictory as his country, and his prose eschews absolutism in any form. The fact that Erickson refuses to say something once, one way, is emblematic of his grudging acceptance of the paradox of America. In *Arc d’X*, Thomas Jefferson is aware of his own hypocrisy, and his guilt manifests itself in the form of crippling headaches. Erickson’s various irreconcilable positions manifest themselves in his uncertain, open-ended fictional world. Nothing stands. It is difficult to “see” the world on the page because it is described so incompletely. In *Days Between Stations*, newlyweds Lauren and Jason live on a “secret street” in Los Angeles that can only be accessed by steps (12). When Lauren tries to find the street years later, she cannot. No one has ever heard of it and it does not exist on any maps. This is the first instance in Erickson’s oeuvre of the kind of disorientation and displacement that haunts his work. Houses shift and streets vanish because they are fictive manifestations of Erickson’s confusion and the confusion of America.

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<sup>47</sup> One sentence begins on page 83 and runs continuously until page 315, slicing through paragraphs all the way, and the text of the entire novel jumps around wildly on the page, forming itself into strange shapes, switching to italics and back again.

<sup>48</sup> To be fair, Erickson expresses awareness of the one-dimensionality of his female characters in an exchange between Banning Jainlight and Kristen in *Our Ecstatic Days*, after the latter browses the former’s script: “I think his big problem is he hasn’t the slightest idea how to write women characters, but he looks completely baffled when you try and tell him this. ‘What do you mean?’ he says. ‘What do I mean? I mean every female character is a stripper or porn star or sex slave.’ He’s thunderstruck. ‘Are you sure?’” (19)

Erickson's ultimately ambivalent attitude suggests that it is important to pay attention to one's evolution. Just as he traces the evolution of his country in his writing, its contradictions and its ideas, he also traces his own timeline, replete with its own small contradictions and ideas. He leaves sentences alone, then modifies them to demonstrate his own bewilderment. He is slippery, not binary. He is swept up in the confusion of himself and of America. Despite being a child of the Sixties and as swept along by those tumultuous years as the rest of his generation, Erickson avoids sentimentalizing that decade or referencing some ideological purity that existed then. Such avoidance is most apparent in Erickson's attitude toward free love. In *American Nomad*, Erickson observes that sex was only perceived as consequence free for a short time. Not so long before the sexual revolution, dying in childbirth was a common danger. From the advent of birth control up until the discovery of the AIDS pandemic, Erickson contends that there was a brief interlude of so-called "free love". However, such consequence-free sex was only available to those who could afford birth control. Therefore "free love" was not a defiant break from America's puritanical origins so much as a matter of being born into the right place at the right time.<sup>49</sup> Though "free love" may have implied the impending arrival of the new, freer operating principals that American society was ostensibly marching toward in the Sixties, it ultimately proved to be a brief respite from danger, not a new mode of life.

The cultural nostalgia that America exhibits toward the Sixties does not emphasize the transformative power of those lost years, it diminishes it. The wistfulness with which that decade is described show just how anomalous it was, and Erickson

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<sup>49</sup> "To those of us old enough to remember what sex was like twenty years ago, AIDS still seems an aberration: 'Sex can kill you!' we exclaim to others and ourselves, astonished. But in fact it was our own age, the age of sex-without-consequence, that was the aberration" (*American Nomad* 84).

dismisses arguments to the contrary as “noxious boomerism” (“Establishing Shot” n.pag.). The folly of the hippies was that they thought they were agents of lasting social change, rather than the vanguards of a passing zeitgeist. Paradoxically, Erickson freely admits that the Sixties were not the transformative times people dreamed them to be – yet he still returns to them again and again in his fiction, particularly in his two most recent novels, *Zeroville* and *These Dreams of You*. That he is still concerned with that tumultuous decade, eight and nine novels into his career, demonstrates the sway those years hold over his imagination. “[W]e romanticized [the Sixties],” he writes, “as soon as we stomped them into their grave” (*American Nomad*, 206). Erickson admits his own culpability by using the plural “we” and not the more indefinite “they”. He is sometimes aware of his own contradictions. If America was never innocent because of Jefferson’s hypocrisy, perhaps the Sixties were never pure because Jerry Rubin went on to become a successful businessman. Or perhaps the arc of Rubin’s professional life is quintessentially paradoxical, and therefore quintessentially American. Erickson may espouse despair and disappointment, but he usually avoids disillusionment because “at the crux of...disillusionment has been the illusion of innocence...[which is] a little odd, since America has never been an innocent country” (“An Interview With Steve Erickson” 406). Erickson knows that such innocence never existed, in the same way that, ever self-aware, he knows full well that he overuses the phrase “which is to say,” that remains his go-to expression when confronted with absolutes.<sup>50</sup>

Others have noticed Erickson’s resistance to absolutes. In her review of *Tours of the Black Clock*, Kathy Acker declares that the book is “above all, a gorgeous argument

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<sup>50</sup> *Litquake*: Which words or phrases do you most overuse? Steve Erickson: “Obsessive” and “which is to say” (“Steve Erickson on Tropic of Cancer” n.pag.).

against a culture of absolutes and for a way of life based on questioning” (“It Was Hitler’s Pornographer” n.pag.). Indeed, this resistance to absolutes and the embrace of paradox can be found everywhere in his fiction. There is the paradox of Jack, the wizard mathematician in *Rubicon Beach*, who demands statistical exactness from a world comprised of numbers – but who does not know his own age, so tells people he is “thirty-eight, thirty-nine” (262). There is the paradoxical behavior of the poor French farmers who take in The Occupant and feed him despite not being able to afford to: “as if often the case with people who have no money – they couldn’t have been more generous” (*The Sea Came in at Midnight* 215). There is the paradox of a novelist being unable to articulate himself, a frustration Erickson even bestows upon his fictional Jefferson: “There are things...a man can explain least of all to those whom he most owes explanations” (*Arc d’X* 33). Erickson sees still more paradox in the general America that exists outside of his fiction, that paradox of America winning the Cold war and then missing such an blatant enemy in the Soviet Union. He sees paradox in the rise of the religious Right and the simultaneous rise of uninhibited-yet-artificial sexuality on television. “These are paradoxes of experience we’re unable to resolve,” Erickson says, “and Americans aren’t people who have much use for ambiguity” (“An Interview With Steve Erickson” 407). Yet the ambiguity persists, because the ambiguity *is* America. James Baldwin once wrote that “[t]he gulf between our dream and the realities that we live is something that we do not understand and do not wish to admit” (“Lockridge” 17). Paradox is woven into the very fabric of America, which is to say it cannot be undone.

### **Obama: Change We Can Believe In**

For Erickson, the contradictions of Thomas Jefferson, particularly with regards to

slavery, remain the primordial contradiction of America, one that cannot be absolved by electing a black man president in 2008 and again in 2012. As Erickson admits, it is not for a white man to decide if a political victory such as Obama's in 2008 somehow produces symbolic reparations for African-Americans. Erickson is not the first white author to admit that "the articulation of black experience requires a black voice" (Menand, "Richard Wright" 84), but he is remarkably honest about his post-election confusion. In America, there is simply too much history to ignore, "too much on the slate for that election to wipe clean all by itself" ("Every Moment I'm Awake" n.pag.), and the fact that change can be believed in does not mean change will be wrought. Of course, the fact that a man who might have been on an auction block in chains a century and a half ago now stands before that country as its President is still a potent symbolic victory. Such a thing was whispered about in 1988 as Jesse Jackson campaigned for the nomination. "That Jackson raised these expectations is incontrovertible," Erickson wrote at the time, "so it is incontrovertible that America, rather than the United States, raises such expectations. It's part of the function of America as idea" (*Leap Year* 105). However, Erickson observed a troubling smugness in Jackson's white supporters – many of whom seemed only to be "congratulating [themselves] for [their] liberalism" rather than evincing genuine interest in the man actually receiving the nomination (*Leap Year* 82). Erickson noted a similar contingent of navel-gazing Caucasians supporting first Colin Powell and then Alan Keyes in the 1996 primaries, as if the respective successes and ambitions of these two men meant that black people were no longer underprivileged in America.

Any reparations to African-Americans, then, will be paradoxical because America

is still an ongoing process and its primordial contradiction still operates today. Erickson's point that "an America marked by the original sin of slavery longed for a black prophet to save it" (*American Nomad* 59) deliberately uses biblical language to demonstrate the mythical enormity – impossible for anyone to live up to – of a black man being elected President. Interviewed after the publication of *These Dreams of You*, Erickson opined that "slavery remains the country's irredeemable transgression, and though we may be doomed in any effort to make it right, we're obligated to try anyway. The futility doesn't mitigate the obligation. The obligation doesn't alter the fact that no white person like myself is in any position to assess just how fulfilled the promise is" ("Every Moment I'm Awake" n.pag.). Therefore, not only is there still a staggering amount of work to do regarding race relations in America, the terms and definitions of such work are yet to be determined, and such work may be doomed anyway because the enormity and brutality of the original transgression can never be forgotten, much less forgiven.

Adding to the mire is the fact that success in America depends as much on "the terminology by which success might be defined" than anything else ("Conversations With My Mother" n.pag.). Therefore, because of the "mythic dimension" of Obama's election, "[h]is presidency has been neutralized by [its] very catharsis" ("The 9/11 President" n.pag.). If the symbolic victory of Obama's election "made people believe in the America of their dreams, then his presidency was bound to disappoint us. It can't help feeling like a betrayal" ("The 9/11 President" n.pag.). This corresponds with the paradoxical nature of Erickson's work, and perhaps helps to demystify his obsessions with paradox in his prose and his beliefs. And he is not speaking only from hindsight. In *American Nomad*, when it seemed as if Colin Powell had a shot at the nomination early in

the 1996 election primaries, Erickson wrote that “there could be no overstating the sheer transformative symbolism of a black man’s election” (240). He predicted the symbolic significance of a black man being elected President, and he also predicted the paradoxical disappointment that came after the honeymoon phase of Obama’s election died down: “[Obama’s] presidency had a mythic dimension that no one was going to live up to...[t]he real question is, has Obama disappointed us or have we disappointed ourselves? If a gap remains between the promise and its fulfillment, that’s the story of the country and always has been” (“The Further I’m Away” n.pag.).

Obama’s more strident critics on the far Right and of the “birther” movement, who reject not just Obama’s ideas and values but the very *fact* of Obama (“I Was A Teenage Conservative” n.pag.), show the same contempt for the democratic process shown by Republicans disgusted by Clinton’s first election, as if to say “any democracy that produces a Clinton presidency invalidates itself” (*American Nomad* 36). Though they would never admit it, many of those in the birther movement are motivated by racial suspicion. The movement seems, at heart, racist in its steadfast belief that a black man with Kenyan lineage could not possibly have been born in America. Those who suspect Obama of Kenyan citizenship are engaging in coded racism, or what John Fiske calls “non-racist racism,” in the way that “the very supportability of the [birthers] insistence to operate for a generalized public good...enables [them] to hide so effectively...operations that are oppressive, exclusionary, and racist” (Fiske 71). By espousing a virulent brand of patriotism and claiming to be acting in the best interest of America, birthers can deny the very reality of their President. They misremember the present. Initially dismissive of the movement, Obama found himself having to address the issue as the cries became more



strident. The thought of a white President being forced to produce his or her birth certificate is ludicrous. Therefore, having allegedly broken the shackles of race and risen to the top office in the world, Obama must still address the world in terms of his very unlikeliness, which is thoroughly paradoxical. And he is not the first black politician to have to do so. Though they share little common political ground (indeed, Keyes was a leading figure in the birther movement and even initiated legal proceedings against the President in November 2008 with the aim of forcing him to produce proof of citizenship), African-American politicians such as Jesse Jackson, Colin Powell, Alan Keyes, and Barack Obama are still compelled by the media to describe their success in terms of how impossible it once would have been in this country for them to hold office. Paradoxically, they are “simultaneously inside and outside systems of domination and oppression” (Spinks 225). Even if the latter now holds the highest office in the world, is he so powerful if he must constantly be reminded that he is the first black president? Is he truly free if he must consistently address the world in such terms?

Finally, in yet another American riddle, there is the possibility that sincere understanding between cultures can be feigned but never truly obtained. Mike Davis argues in *City of Quartz* that these quasi-understandings are often based on conjecture between differing groups, incomplete information gleaned by absorbing the cultural productions of a given Other group, not from any true or deeper understanding (88). Perhaps perversely, Baudrillard worries about the consequences of a less tense society, warning that greater tolerance would paradoxically bring greater indifference. He found that latter quality to be particular to Americans. “No longer wishing others to see them, Americans end up not seeing one another. So people pass in the street without looking at

one another, which may seem a mark of discretion and civility, but which is also a sign of indifference” (*America* 103). Erickson encounters such American indifference in *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*. He wrote the former book believing 1988 to be an important election (the end of the Reagan era, no incumbent for the first time in twenty years, the election where America would take a “leap” into the future). He also believed 1996 would be an important election, the last one of the Twentieth Century, and therefore symbolically important. Yet in both books, he repeatedly encounters the shrugging indifference of Americans. He is more amazed than disillusioned when he realizes, while covering the 1996 election “from Los Angeles to Chicago...[he] did not see a *single bumper sticker* of anyone running for anything; on the radio [he] never heard a whisper of politics” (*American Nomad* 180). Regarding such apathy, Baudrillard simply shrugs: “This is a result of our societies withdrawing political interest” (123). Of course (and this too is contradictory), Erickson knows that the more America transforms into something he disapproves of, the more raw material he has for writing and glib phrasemaking. Regarding the political apathy of most Americans’, he concludes that “America has become a secret unto itself” (*American Nomad* 157).

### **Vietnam**

War has become secretive too. Wars involving America do not take place in America anymore. Aside from a swift and sudden attack on a Hawaiian atoll in 1942 and a similarly sudden attack on 9/11, there has not been serious sustained bloodshed on American soil since the Civil War, which was later fought over to right to keep slaves, but initially over the “Northern/Southern cultural and economic divide...between industrialization and agriculture” (Slethaug “Mapping the Trope” 21). This distant,

dreamlike quality to war, coupled with the then-still-vibrant victory culture of America, exoticized and glamourized the Vietnam War to the extent that many who did not know what it was about were eager to fight. “Before Vietnam,” Erickson insists, “American men grew up with the idea of war as a crucible. The experience of war was one in which you passed from being a boy to a man and found out who you were” (“An Interview With Steve Erickson” 407). He was never called upon, however, and has contradictory feelings on the matter.

Though he had a high draft number and was never recruited for Vietnam, Erickson claims that “if they had called [him], [he] would have gone” (*Leap Year* 145). Here Erickson echoes a sentiment espoused by Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried*, that those who went to war were the true cowards for not having the courage to disappoint their parents by dodging the draft or fleeing to Canada.<sup>51</sup> “I was a coward,” concludes O’Brien. “I went to the war” (61). America engenders and enforces such fear with its ferocious cultural “militarism” (Primeau 13). Erickson’s insistence that he would have gone without complaint to fight the Viet Cong may even be disingenuous posturing under the pressure of such cultural militarism, pressure which extends itself even into the literary world. It is no coincidence that the veteran Tim O’Brien won the National Book Award in 1979 (for another Vietnam book, *Going After Cacciato*) while his fellow nominee, John Irving (a non-veteran whose status as a parent exempted him from the draft), was snubbed for his now-classic *The World According to Garp*. Irving is not so far removed from O’Brien in terms of craft, and both writers share a muscular, careful prose

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<sup>51</sup> In “On the Rainy River” from *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien recounts taking a fishing trip to the titular river shortly after being drafted. His initial plan is to flee into Canada, which lies on other side of the water, but he loses his nerve: “I would go the war – I would kill and maybe die” writes O’Brien, “because I was embarrassed not to” (59).

style. The difference between them is that Irving had become a literary darling by this point, and was likely despised by men like O'Brien and their ilk – those who went over.<sup>52</sup>

But many did not go over, and most Americans' "experience" of the Vietnam War was gleaned from television and newspaper coverage. For most Americans, including Erickson, the war had a "dreamy, unwarlike quality" because it was fought in a geographically and culturally distant land (Engelhardt 6). Vietnam was not a crucible for Erickson, and his good fortune to "[avoid] a bad war... didn't have quite the same weight or resonance of meaning, and didn't sharply and unmistakably define one's manhood in the same way. Rather it procrastinated the definitions of manhood" (*American Nomad* 220). The paradox here is that, despite his criticism of that war, he still sounds disappointed he did not get to go, as if he feels that he missed out on a defining moment, despite the fact that "thirty years later, particularly given the collapse of communism, no one can offer a single sound argument why that war had to be fought" ("An Interview With Steve Erickson" 408). Of course, Erickson is not the only American who has conflicting thoughts about Vietnam.

In *American Nomad*, Erickson notes the contradictory rhetorical nature of a 1996 standoff between Dan Quayle, a draft dodger who retroactively supported Vietnam, and Bill Clinton, a draft dodger who remained critical of it:

The Right that has hated Clinton for not serving in the Vietnam War has never similarly hated Dan Quayle or Newt Gingrich for the same. The difference is that Clinton's avoidance of military service remains a subtle restatement of the

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<sup>52</sup> The situation is reminiscent of William Manchester's famous remark that "Frank Sinatra was the most hated man of World War II, much more than Hitler" (Kelley 54). Sinatra famously stayed home in America and was often seen photographed with a woman on each arm in magazines distributed to men like Manchester who were sent overseas to fight. This is another paradox of American history, that an American pop singer could be hated with more intensity than Adolf Hitler.

ongoing twenty-five-year argument that the war was bad, while Quayle's is a declaration that the war was noble. In the eyes of the Right, the hypocrisy of Quayle's position – his belief that it was a fine war for someone else to die in – does not discredit but rather absolves him. In contrast Clinton is the embodiment of something the country still cannot allow itself to believe: that it was an entirely useless war in which fifty-eight thousand Americans, not to mention countless Vietnamese, died for nothing. (34)

Erickson's diction here is significant. Suggesting that both Americans and Vietnamese "died for nothing" is to say they did not die for their respective countries. One thinks of James Baldwin's brother, home on furlough from WWII, who "had never seen the America his uniform was meant to represent. Had anyone? Did he know, had he met, anyone who had? Did anyone live there?" ("Introduction" 15). If one's country is a paradox, or, as discussed in Chapter Three, a private idea, how can one die for it if no one else shares the idea? Yet, despite his criticism of the Vietnam War, Erickson still sounds sore that he missed it, a paradox of inexperience he seems unable to resolve.

### **Dream On: American Exceptionalism and Morality**

The unresolvable nature of the paradox that is America endures in the form of American Exceptionalism, which is "the notion, albeit contested, that America from its inception has had a special *raison d'être* and destiny based on religion, politics, economy, and culture" (Slethaug "Mapping the Trope" 13-14). Exceptionalism is also connected to individuality and the capacity for reinvention, which now more than ever is connected to celebrity culture and the promise of fame. In everyone's secret America there is the potential to be recognized, and "[t]he persistence of the collective memory of an idealized

American space depends on this perceived capacity for reinvention” (Agnew 7). Untethered to history, America is supposed to be a “blank” slate – though it was never vacant, of course. People lived there first. There is a profound contradiction in the promise of America, in that America promises a break from history in a land freighted with its own paradoxical, unshakeable history. Erickson is aware of this, and his fiction “insists that we take responsibility for the way we are shaped by the past” (Spinks 222). For Engelhardt, the abiding promise of America was and is the promise that any circumstance or situation which breaks the promise of America is only a temporary barricade, a “correctable” wrong to be answered by the promise (Engelhardt 4). For Engelhardt, the promise of America is that the gap between itself and its fulfillment be closed. For Erickson the promise of America is the gap itself. If the gap cannot be transcended, then a kind of stasis comes upon the American Dream. When Erickson was a boy “the future used to be where all things American began” whereas now “America feels at the end of its own power” (*American Nomad* 28, 29). Exposed by a past it cannot outrun, the American Dream becomes the American Lie.

Both Michael Ventura and Larry McCaffery have noted that Erickson’s fiction is “fiercely moralistic” (McCaffery 396), and at the heart of his moralism is his refusal to subscribe to the notion of a once-innocent America. He contends that innocence is a word that simply cannot apply to a country whose “original residents were systematically wiped out and the new tenants built a society in large part on the people who were shipped over in chains from another continent” (*American Nomad* 32). What makes Erickson different from Melville or Hawthorne or Twain or Dreiser in pointing out this contradiction is his post-Vietnam sensibility: “Americans are now fifty years removed

from the redeeming experience of World War II, where we could say, without any real fear of history contradicting us, that we were the good guys, and in that fifty years we've had nothing but experiences that taint that sense of righteousness" ("An Interview With Steve Erickson" 407). This righteousness may be tainted, but still lives on in the idea of American Exceptionalism which is bolstered by "ever-renewed self evidence" (Baudrillard 91) which often has to do with the accumulation of material possessions or outward proof of American ingenuity or superiority in major events such as the moon landings or sporting victories over other nations. So prevalent is American Exceptionalism that Baudrillard opines that the Vietnam War was won by both sides, by the "Vietnamese on the ground [and] by the Americans in the electronic mental space" (*America* 51). For Erickson, Exceptionalism feeds the Dream of America, and is of the same order of obliviousness that ignores the paradox of America.

For the most part, Erickson seems to be worried not so much that the paradox exists, but that it goes so unexamined. "[I]f we despise ourselves for [our] hypocrisy," he warns, "at another level we have convinced ourselves that we've earned our delusions. This is because we have secretly come to fear and resent that the American dream itself may be a delusion" (*American Nomad* 31). The consequences of embracing the American paradox without examining it is the threat of its bequeathal down the generations, unquestioned, so that no consequences come to the paradox itself. And Erickson, ever the moralist, "[believes] in a culture that has consequences" ("Phantasmal America" n.pag.). In this way, the myths and paradoxes of America would only multiply, when there are already more than enough. Erickson worries that such a thing is a symptom of willful ignorance, a "failure of nerve that always seems to doom the country's best lurking

possibilities” (*American Nomad* 176), although he too occasionally accepts established narratives uncritically, such as when he worries about the declension of American morality from Jefferson’s best intentions, not Jefferson’s true actions. For the most part, though, he recognizes the paradox inherent in America, and seeks to give utterance to those oppressed by it. If the “properly ethical attitude to history demands that responsibility be taken for...marginalized and forgotten figures” (Spinks 229), then part of the function of characters like Sally Hemings from *Arc d’X* or Catherine from *Rubicon Beach* is to imagine and give voice to the oppression of such figures, even if this voicing is both retroactive and paradoxically rendered through the lens of a white American male. One gets the sense that Erickson considers himself an American nomad because he remembers too much in a country whose promise only seems graspable if the past is forgotten.

## **Conclusion**

“For me there is no truth of America,” writes Baudrillard. “I ask of the Americans only that they be Americans” (Baudrillard 27). This, of course, means he asks only that they remain contradictory.<sup>53</sup> For Baudrillard and Erickson and many others, the American paradox abides. It is part of the political and cultural fabric of the country. The inherited and constant tension produced between “inauguration and nihilism” (Spinks 231) clouds a clear reading of Jefferson *and* Erickson, and that which is considered to be history is actually “an indeterminate site of ethical and conceptual labor” (Spinks 233). Moreover, if “[t]he Jeffersonian inheritance is both constitutive and subversive of American conceptions of selfhood” (Spinks 221), then American identity is formed within this

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<sup>53</sup> Baudrillard also sees paradox in more specific parts of America. In his trip to New York City he notes that “there is a certain solitude like no other” there (Baudrillard 15). He sees a paradoxical loneliness in America’s most populous city.



contradiction, in the same way the American Dream of prosperity lives in the gulf between the reality and the self-projected potential of any given American dreamer. Agnew rejects Exceptionalism when critiquing America, claiming that “[a]ll countries have ‘gaps’ between the spatial claims implicit in their self-declared ideals and the empirical geography of their places” (*American Space/American Place* 3). But if other countries have gaps, America has yawning *canyons* between its self-declared ideals and the lived daily realities of its inhabitants. One thinks of Llewelyn or Jack, the failed creators in *Rubicon Beach*, who believed that America would notice them and bestow upon them rewards and recognition commensurate to their talents. Despite their respective failures, each man still dreams of that lost future “that his heart won’t forget” (282). The Dream abides even in those it crushes.

For Erickson, America “always has belonged to the rest of the world’s imagination more than its own” (*These Dreams of You* 301). As Baudrillard’s fascination demonstrates, and as Erickson insists, America occupies the world’s imagination, not its spaces in the classic colonial sense of an empire that subjugates people and is administered from afar. Its empire is therefore more elusive, an empire of the psyche “imprinted on the modern gene” (*These Dreams of You* 309). It is not just the ubiquity of the Coca-Cola logo. It is more insidious and pervasive. Perhaps it takes an outsider’s perspective, whether Baudrillard’s grand hypotheses or Spinks’ eloquent musings, or even Erickson’s lonely nomadic worrying, to see beyond the misremembered miscellany to the paradox of America. For it is certainly easier to pretend the paradox is not there. As Erickson writes, “we’ve so persuaded ourselves of some America dawn, that we haven’t noticed how the dark night goes on” (*Leap Year* 85).

Baudrillard writes, “if it is negativity, irony, and the sublime that govern European thinking, it is paradox which dominates that of America, the paradoxical humour of an achieved materiality” (91). In Erickson, achieved materiality does not mean that the promise of America has been fulfilled. It simply yields more problems. As “[w]e display less and less patience...with America” (*American Nomad* 30), Erickson argues, its paradoxes appear more blatant, with the result that “[t]he nation gets meaner and more petty until rage is the only national passion left – and then it is anger not at those on top, which is the anger America is born of, but at those on the bottom, for whom America is supposed to be the last abiding dream” (*American Nomad* 30). Erickson rails against this desolate conclusion even as he admits that America is “the contradiction that goes by the name of truth” (*American Nomad* 201). He is less conscious of his own contradictions, but that simply makes him appropriately American. Indeed, paradox is the essential truth of America, but it is Erickson’s dim hope that his literary investigations may cast light on its essential defects so that America might claim responsibility for them and, in doing so, reveal an America whose promises are possible.

## Chapter Five

### American Promises: Rock and Roll in Steve Erickson's Oeuvre

*When Thomas Jefferson invented rock and roll it became the sound of damnation as it existed in the heart of the greatest and guiltiest American who ever lived.*  
– Steve Erickson, *Leap Year*

Erickson considers rock and roll an American art because it promises something elusive and fleeting in the same way the American Dream promises something elusive and fleeting. And, like all of Erickson's thematic preoccupations, rock and roll influences the form of his work. According to Lee Spinks, "the conceptual rhythms of Erickson's book replicate the imaginative structures present in the most important rock n roll of the last thirty years" (Spinks 222). Spinks could be referring to boldly digressive works like Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica* and likening them to the many jarring digressions found in Erickson's books, or he might simply be referring to the particularly American adventurousness that characterizes both Erickson's work and classic albums like *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Born to Run*. Either way, a rock and roll sensibility informs Erickson's books in the same way that his overarching awareness of America does. His insistence in *Leap Year* that he's "not looking for America" (14) could just as easily be a rebuttal to the Simon and Garfunkel song as to *Easy Rider* or *On the Road*. His remark that Jefferson "invented" rock and roll has more to do with the genre's Jeffersonian emphasis on individuality and expression. And, like Jefferson, rock and roll has persistent and inherent contradictions.

In Erickson's writing, the promise of rock and roll is akin to the promise of America, and he brings the same investigative caution and moral rigor to the music that he does to his country. He is not alone in his seriousness. There is a small but vocal

contingent of Rolling Stones fans still miffed at the band for releasing an album called *It's Only Rock and Roll* in 1974. The cheek of them, these fans bitterly argue, the unadulterated nerve of the self-proclaimed “greatest rock and roll band in the world” releasing an album that trivialized their own music. Such fans take their rock and roll very seriously. One imagines them as unkempt, ravenous Lester Bangs-types who hoard massive vinyl collections and become wistful whenever 8-tracks are mentioned. They believe in the redemptive power of music, and seem to operate on the premise that, if music is an expression of something essential – attitude, identity, passion – then its creators should not be irreverent toward it. It a fiercely moral attitude to take toward a genre usually noted for its salacious subject matter.

Erickson is one of these staunch moralists, and his tendency to brood is not diminished by the infectious din of rock and roll, even while he occasionally admits its infantile nature. Of course, given Erickson’s unshakeable preoccupation with the country he was born in, he muses about rock and roll through an American lens, and worries in particular about how it operates as an expression of identity. For Erickson, those who make the music are not simply singing songs – they are consciously asserting an identity. Audiences intuitively understand this, in the sense that espoused admiration of a given artist is a badge of identity.<sup>54</sup> Wearing a Bruce Springsteen t-shirt is an assertion of identity in the same way that wearing a Prince t-shirt is an assertion of identity in the same way that outspoken support of Reagan is a badge of identity<sup>55</sup> – though the

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<sup>54</sup> In the current cultural climate, with the Internet and the atomization of culture, it is perfectly acceptable now to express appreciation for both Bruce Springsteen and Prince. But in the 1980s liking an artist was more of an alliance. Kurt Cobain once remarked on these once-strict boundaries: “To be a punk rocker...at a Black Flag show and you said you like R.E.M....you just couldn’t do it” (*Come As You Are* 88).

<sup>55</sup> Canadian-born rocker Neil Young took some flak in the press and from his chiefly liberal fan base for espousing admiration for Reagan in the 1980s (*Shakey: Neil Young’s Biography* 18).

identities being asserted are markedly different. This chapter will explore rock and roll in Erickson's work, attending to its promise of identity. The figures we are concerned with are Bruce Springsteen, John Mellencamp, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. The genres examined are rock and roll and its sloppier offspring, punk rock. While neither Reagan, Obama nor Jefferson are actual rock musicians, they are emblematic of the self-invention promised by both rock and roll and America, and suggest the artifice that may lurk beneath asserted identities.

Of course, there is nothing proprietarily American about rock and roll. But a case might be made for an inherently American *quality* to rock n roll. In writing "Thomas Jefferson invented rock and roll" (*Leap Year* 30), Erickson does not mean that the man actually invented the genre, nor is he suggesting that he even had anything to do with music. It means that the spirit of America and the spirit of rock and roll are, to Erickson, very similar. This is not to diminish the magnitude of the British Invasion or the contributions of Ronnie Hawkins and his backup band to the genre, but rock and roll can be read as inherently American in the way that it embraces and celebrates both life and death, sometimes simultaneously. Erickson's obsession with rock and roll comes from the same place his obsession with America does – individuality, danger, the death drive, artistic recklessness, and the promise of reinvention. There are obvious examples of Americans who died for rock and roll like Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain. The notion of reinvention that rock and roll promises sometimes depends upon its most fierce practitioners dying from it, because "the reconfiguration of the self is always also dependent upon the death of the self" (Spinks 220). Because they died, the abovementioned artists are severed from history because they cannot be judged by the

lights of future releases that did not live up to the promise of earlier ones, and also because their music will always carry the glow of its own bursting potential, potential suggested but never fulfilled, the future that never happened.

Erickson believes in the more general power of the music itself than in the indelible loveliness of the perfect pop song, preferring instead to witness a great melody, great lyrics, and a great personality merge into one. This happens rarely, but when it does, it is proof that “once in a while the most specious promise of American rock and roll comes true, the promise that it can release you from what you are and reveal some way toward what you want to be” (*Leap Year* 30-31). The importance of the music lies in its promise to effect (and affect) identity, which is why Erickson writes about rock and roll using the same language he uses to write about America. When he analyzes towering figures like Frank Sinatra, Bruce Springsteen, John Mellencamp, and Kurt Cobain, it is often difficult to know if he is writing about his country or the music, which is surely intentional. Like his approach toward politicians, he more interested in who rock artists *are* than what they *do*.

### **Belief and The Boss**

Because rock and roll must be *believed*, to an extent, Erickson argues that it “has never been an art for cynics, who’ll dabble in it only when it amuses them cerebrally or offers a trendy payoff” (*Leap Year* 31). One cannot be cynical and believe in rock and roll because “[c]ynicism is always the most bitter expression of broken faith” (*American Nomad* 204). Again, demonstrating his disdain for ideologues, Erickson has criticized those who found themselves the target of Tipper Gore’s wrath in the 1980s – “those who rose to defend [rock and roll] by ridiculing its consequence and power: This isn’t worth

being afraid of, they argued. Thus they hurt the music more than its critics ever did. They supposed they might protect it by trivializing it” (*Leap Year* 31). The music’s ostensible defenders demonstrated their cynicism toward it, which ultimately betrayed their disbelief in rock and roll. To their credit, at least Tipper Gore and the PMRC evinced fearful deference for the music, and their fear attested to rock and roll’s power and influence. Its defenders – in a similar manner to the Stones proclaiming it was “only rock and roll” – rendered it silly and infantile, which Erickson considers a far greater insult. His work backs up this position; Erickson has never written casually or flippantly about music – every reference to it, from the banned radios of *Rubicon Beach* to the explosive punk scenes of *Zeroville* to the metaphysical musings on Springsteen in *American Nomad*, is freighted with the solemnity and respect of the believer.

Such belief may explain why Erickson admires the artists he does – ones who wear their beliefs on their sleeves (he prefers the primal sonic wanderings of Iggy Pop and Lou Reed, artists who lived their songs, to the cold cerebralism of Rush or Zappa). His belief also unwittingly emphasizes, again, that he is the “secret heir” to Thomas Pynchon (Evenson “The Romantic Fabulist” n.pag.). Pynchon has always displayed unwavering devotion to rock and roll, from the American band advised by their manager to sing in British accents in *The Crying of Lot 49* to his unusual decision to pen the liner notes to the album *Nobody’s Cool* by the fairly mediocre rock band Lotion in 1996. Of course, Pynchon also peppers his fiction with silly songs that might be taken as digs at the doggerel that is the typical rock and roll lyric sheet. But Erickson has his contradictions too. If rock and roll promises the “continual reinvention of identity” (Spinks 220), then what accounts for Erickson’s fervent worship of Bruce Springsteen?

Despite his withdrawal from the limelight in the 1990s and his much-publicized move to Los Angeles (which saw his detractors accuse him of going Hollywood), Bruce Springsteen never reinvented his persona. Certainly he changed his sound, first when he fired the E-Street band and again in the mid-Nineties when he went acoustic, but his persona has always been that of the earnest, blue-collar working man. Even at the height of Brucemania in the mid-80s, after the release of “Dancing in the Dark,” Springsteen appeared in the video for “I’m On Fire” playing a downtrodden, bashful mechanic, stunned into silence by a good-looking older-but-married woman who drops her car off at the garage. His hangdog expression and shuffling manner are convincing: Bruce can act. He is believable. And, as evidenced by the oil on his hands, he shows an understanding of and investment in the character. But while it works for the video, his acting skills should ultimately be troubling to his fans, many of whom believe in his image and iconography just as much, if not more, than his music. If he can act that well, who is to say his persona isn’t also an act, the role of his career?

Given his insistent focus on blue-collar subjects despite his wealth, and his overdone accent in songs like “Nebraska” and “Devils and Dust”, it is easy to find cracks in the façade of the Springsteen myth. Much of Erickson’s awe for Springsteen has to do with the sense of destiny the man has always exhibited, how “in concert [he] seems so clearly destined to what he’s become” (*Leap Year* 31). In terms of destiny, Erickson may be referencing Jon Landau’s famously prophetic review of a 1974 Springsteen concert (the same year the Rolling Stones released their unacceptably irreverent record) in which he wrote, “I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen. And on a night when I needed to feel young, he made me feel like I was hearing music for the very first



time” (Masur 9). Note the language of rebirth in Landau’s review, the exaltation, the insistence that he felt young again, as if experiencing music for the first time. This is the promise of Springsteen: he will transport you; you will feel young again. Daniel Cavicchi has also noticed the solemn religiosity with which Springsteen fans approach his music, the live show is equivalent to the Sunday sermon, but there are other valuable rituals, such as camping out for tickets, buying new releases, studying the liner notes, and chatting with other fans about favourite songs (*Tramps Like Us* 25). Springsteen elicits an intensity of devotion from his fans that one likely would not see in fans of Milli Vanilli. They believe in the Springsteen myth. They worship him and excuse him his inconsistencies – Erickson included.

But one wonders what Erickson thought of Springsteen’s baffling decision in 2009 to make yet another hits compilation available only at Wal-Mart, a company emblematic of the decline of the mom-and-pop shop in America (Clark “Springsteen says Wal-Mart” n.pag.). The hits compilation itself is suspect, as the man had already released six throughout his career by that point (not to mention that eleven of the songs on the 2009 release had already appeared on his 1995 compilation) (Pareles “The Rock Laureate” n.pag.). But far worse was that the self-appointed champion of blue-collar America made an exclusive deal with a company as monolithic and anti-union as Wal-Mart. Granted, Springsteen later apologized to his fans, but, for many, the damage had been done. Pitchfork writer Ryan Dombal wrote, “the more cynical part of me...can't help but interpret the Wal-Mart fiasco as a bait-and-switch: bite the bullet, appease the label, work with Wal-Mart and then calm the fans with a heartfelt apology in the paper of record” (Dombal “Springsteen Admits Mistake” n.pag.). Indeed, the word “mistake” is a

tepid understatement when one considers that Springsteen was doing business with a company that fairly recently had to settle a lawsuit accusing them of child labour violations committed on American soil (Greenhouse “Wal-Mart Agrees to Pay Fine” n.pag.). Finally, less troubling than child labor violations but still dismaying, is the fact that Springsteen rehearses his own stage banter (Pareles “The Rock Laureate” n.pag.), definitive proof that what seems casual is in fact calculated.

Yet even in works like *American Nomad* and *Leap Year*, Erickson gives Bruce preferential treatment by insisting he is different from “prima donnas” like Michael Jackson, Madonna and Prince because he has the distinction of “having something to say” (*American Nomad* 64). This assertion betrays Erickson’s guitar-centric bias – he is suspicious of music that employs synthesizers.<sup>56</sup> He does not consider the fact that Prince or Madonna or Michael Jackson might indeed have something to say, and that he simply prefers the sound of Springsteen’s voice. By the lights of Jackson’s stratospheric rise into stardom or Prince’s instrumental calisthenics or Madonna’s instincts for the dance floor zeitgeist, Springsteen’s scripted Americana comes off as tired, if not uninspired. In 1984, Prince released *Purple Rain*, an album that provided the soundtrack to a movie he also played the lead in. Like the music or not, one cannot claim that Prince did not have lofty ambitions. Meanwhile, Springsteen had just released an album called *Born in the U.S.A.* (the title track that would be hijacked by Reagan as a jingoistic campaign song) that was a tired retread of the same themes he had been exploring for almost a decade. It is remarkable just how rote the deep cuts on that album are. “Downbound Train” and “My Hometown,” in particular, see Bruce in full-on self-parody mode, singing about the same

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<sup>56</sup> In a recent review of *Boogie Nights* for The Essential Movie Library series in *Los Angeles Magazine*, Erickson calls disco “the worst pop music of all time” (“Boogie Nights” n.pag.).

things he'd always sung about – the downtrodden American worker – but with more money in his bank account than in the coffers of Flint, Michigan. In 1984, Michael Jackson was touring for the already released but brilliant *Thriller*, and Madonna had recently released *Like a Virgin* – a vital album featuring many of her signature songs, many of which she co-wrote. It is unfair to say that these artists somehow had less to say than Springsteen, who, for the most part, was saying the same thing he'd always said, albeit to a larger (and therefore less discerning) audience.

Finally, Erickson views Springsteen's retreat from the limelight in the Nineties as evidence of his realness. He was wounded, not just by the indifference with which the public received *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, but by the betrayal of the Dream itself: "As it had for many Americans, for Springsteen the Nineties had become a chasm called the American Dream, but he found himself on the other side of that chasm, stranded from the audience that had brought him to that point, cut off by the Dream from America itself" (*American Nomad* 65). Erickson is asserting that the myth of Springsteen could no longer afford the success of the person, but it was not solely his wealth that tarnished the myth. The move from New Jersey to Los Angeles undoubtedly hurt his image, as did the bloated excess of releasing two albums on the same day – a move that inadvertently drew comparisons to L.A. glam-rockers Guns N' Roses. Finding himself for the first time judged and not praised, Springsteen was disillusioned. He had failed to transcend. No one wanted to hear his promises anymore. His pain was singular, according to Erickson, because disillusionment was not in the vocabulary of his peers: "for Sinatra part of the American dream's appeal was its very tawdriness, and whereas Dylan was always opportunistic enough to see the Dream in terms of practical uses, Springsteen deeply

believed in the Dream, and therefore the betrayal implicit in its promise was more poignant” (*American Nomad* 65). Again, Erickson privileges Springsteen’s intentions above those of other artists because of the seeming honesty of his approach, which makes less sense when one considers, as mentioned above, the fact that Springsteen’s skills as an actor complicate the honesty he needs to project in order to be believed. Moreover, his wealth – coupled with PR disasters like the public leaking of his downright regal backstage rider in 2002 (caviar and champagne) or the abovementioned Wal-Mart debacle – complicates the working-class image he has tried vainly to maintain. Acknowledging that such things trouble the Springsteen myth, Erickson ultimately dismisses them because, to him, Springsteen is “still possessed of the American conviction that, in a country that has always refused to be the prisoner of history, he was not destiny’s prisoner but rather destiny was his” (*American Nomad* 66). Perhaps Erickson feels a spiritual alliance with the Boss, as he must be aware that they share an ambivalent attitude toward the American road. As noted in Chapter Two, Erickson deploys the trope in order to resist its conventions, while Springsteen initially glamourized it in early albums like *Born to Run* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* only to disavow it in *The River*<sup>57</sup> and *Nebraska*. Their preoccupation with the road is not the only trait they share; both men have paradoxical personalities.

### **The Actors: Ronald Reagan and John Cougar Mellencamp**

Despite the troubling realities that complicate the Springsteen myth, and despite the fact the he is just as concerned with who these figures *are* as with what they *do*, Erickson does not examine Springsteen anywhere near as critically as he examines

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<sup>57</sup> “Drive All Night” and “Wreck on the Highway” are not classic road songs. They disrupt the myth of the American highway.

Ronald Reagan, though both men played messianic roles in America in the 1980s. Reagan's promise appealed to conservative America and, as mentioned in Chapter Three, offered material fulfillment, suburban "utopian spaces for the private citizen to experience the 1980s as the 1950s" (Spinks 222). Whether Reagan kept that promise depends on what kind of American one asks. Erickson emphatically shakes his head. He compares Reagan to Pat Robertson, a wildly successful televangelist who still plays a role on TV today, and who "knows that empires are built on the lies that fools believe" (*Leap Year* 65). Robertson promises his followers nothing less than heaven, but the fulfillment of that celestial guarantee cannot be inspected by the earthbound. When asked about religion, Erickson professes to believe in God fifty days out of a hundred ("Every Moment I'm Awake"), but he is much firmer in his belief that Robertson "exploited the name of the God he loved for the sake of a profit" (*Leap Year* 66). Reagan and Robertson, then, were always employing a persona for some ulterior gain. But why is John Cougar exempt from suspicion of such dubious conduct? Because he took back his name.

John Cougar became John Cougar Mellencamp in 1983. This is proof, writes Erickson, that there is a "basic equation" to Mellencamp, a primordial person behind the persona (*Leap Year* 36). Erickson gives no such leeway to Reagan or Robertson – though Mellencamp, like Reagan, has worked as an actor in Hollywood. Given his capability as a thespian, Mellencamp's *aw shucks* heartland demeanor and corn-fed smile could be every bit as calculated as Reagan's everyman populism. The fact that Mellencamp acts more humble does not make it any less an act. Yet, Erickson criticizes Reagan for acting too much like Ronald Reagan:

This isn't to say that Reagan hasn't meant the things he's said. It's to say that those things can't be held as the expression of something fundamental in him, a basic equation to be expressed. We elected a man to play Ronald Reagan. That he's persisted in doing it so well remains to foremost measure by which we've judged him (*Leap Year* 36).

Baudrillard has also noticed this professional sheen to Reagan's persona, writing that "the smile of advertising...is also Reagan's smile" (Baudrillard 34). The implication is that Ronald Reagan sold his persona to America. But Mellencamp was selling something too.

Erickson saw Mellencamp in concert in 1978, back when he was still Johnny Cougar, but found him unimpressive at the time (*Leap Year* 30). "His identity," writes Erickson, "not to mention his music, was entirely constructed from the identities and music of other artists" (*Leap Year* 30). This was during punk's ascent as a cultural phenomenon, a genre/lifestyle that dictated "you could be what you chose to be as long as the choice was authentic, a contradiction that some found a way to make work" (*Leap Year* 30). Johnny Cougar did not make it work, at least not for Erickson. Those who *did* make it work had "calculated something from a basic equation that existed somewhere inside them all along" (*Leap Year* 30). "It wouldn't have crossed my mind that Johnny Cougar had such a basic equation," writes Erickson, implying that Cougar changing his name back to Mellencamp later affirmed such an equation (*Leap Year* 30). Erickson is seemingly unaware of the contradiction here, the fact that both Cougar and Mellencamp could be conscious constructions. The fact that Mellencamp took back his real name and began writing songs about suffering farmers in the heartland likely had more to do with the towering influence Springsteen had had on American music (and the tendency of

lesser artists to ape him in order to sell records) than any kind of assertion of true identity. He did not jettison the Cougar part of his name until 1991. Cougar was his middle name for much of his 80s success. Does this mean he was only half real? Did he have his own promises or did he simply guess correctly at a promise an audience wanted to hear? John Cougar Mellencamp had still taken his cue from other artists – those with average American monikers like Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty – and his music was baldly imitative in mining well-worn Springsteen territory.

John Cougar reclaiming his last name demonstrates his savvy awareness of musical trends and his instinct for self-preservation. After all, having an acerbic last name was a hallmark of late-1970s punk – think Johnny Rotten or Richard Hell – not of 1980s Americana. But Erickson does not consider this possibility, and instead compares Mellencamp to Thomas Jefferson: “At the core of Mellencamp’s Americanism is the release of who he is from what he was” (*Leap Year* 32). Erickson believes that because John Mellencamp went on to greater commercial success after relegating his *nom de plume* to a mere middle name, he was happier. He had been released from having to pretend. Jefferson’s contribution to America was the crucial caveat that “there are moments when the state must subvert its will to that of the individual spirit” (*Leap Year* 30), and John Mellencamp had ostensibly asserted that individual spirit against a monolithic culture that would have had him stay Johnny Cougar forever. Erickson argues that John Mellencamp was being essentially American by reclaiming his birth name, but never argues convincingly that such a thing was Mellencamp’s true intention. One could argue that the line between where Johnny Cougar ended and John Mellencamp began is invisible, and known only to the artist himself. One could argue that, faced with a shifting

musical climate, John Cougar decided to play John Cougar Mellencamp, and that the gambit paid off.

### **The Promise of Punk**

“I don’t think there’s any question that I’ve been influenced by movies and rock n roll” (“An Interview With Steve Erickson” 402), Erickson has stated, and he welds both these influences together in *Zeroville*, a novel featuring an antisocial (and possibly sociopathic) film savant named Vikar who finds his niche in the nascent punk-rock scene of America. Vikar quickly gains a reputation for going berserk in mosh pits, which earns him the grudging respect of the too-cool punk crowd. Here is his epiphanic moment:

“The Sound, made by the band on the main stage, is overwhelming; people at the front fling themselves wildly into each other. Something wells up in Vikar. There’s a break” (*Zeroville* 154). Vikar blacks out in the mosh pit and comes to later – a scene intended to carry the quality of rebirth – the kind of reinvention rock and roll is supposed to promise.

Upon initially moving to Los Angeles in the late Sixties, Vikar has no use for the Grateful Dead or for jangly hippie rock and roll. When he hears punk for the first time, he finds himself emotionally moved by the music – not by the notes or melodies themselves but by the raw primal sound of it. He realizes “it was always the Sound...the Sound has become about itself, the Sound is about its own truth and corruption in the same way that, a little more than twenty years after the Movies found their sound, there was a wave of movies about the Movies” (*Zeroville* 154).<sup>58</sup> Erickson suggests that the rudimentary musicianship of punk rock is what made it so honest. The shambolic approach was tantamount to musical corruption, but punk musicians were aware of their limitations,

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<sup>58</sup> The examples given are *Sunset Boulevard*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, *The Big Knife*, and *The Bad and the Beautiful* (154).



which made them honest. It was not the music itself that made punk seem new – general consensus is that it was just a sped up version of rock and roll chord progressions.<sup>59</sup> It was the attitude.

According to Erickson, the sincerity of the punk attitude and the corrupted approach to the music made punk feel like a rebirth of rock and roll. Vikar – a radically original film editor who disavows continuity in his films – understands that such dramatic rebirth is vital. In *Zeroville*, the punk phenomenon spreads westward across America (like industry and pioneers) and ultimately ends up in California, in slightly altered form, in bands like Devo and X whom Vikar goes to see any chance he can. He signs on to direct a film about this nascent scene, entitled *God's Worst Nightmare*, “starring Harvey Keitel and based on a 19<sup>th</sup>-century French novel that has been updated to a local punk milieu” (234). Perhaps inevitably, the sheen of Hollywood corrupts the corruption Vikar loves so much: “The soundstage on the Columbia lot looks a lot like a punk club envisioned by someone whose never been inside one” (238). This is the first of his many disillusionments. Later, at a punk club, he is shocked to see that everyone in the audience has a shaved and tattooed head, like himself: “They’re all behind Vikar watching him, as though he’s the general of an army” (276). Vikar realizes that the music he loves is just one facet of an overarching *scene*, a scene in which one’s fashion choices and attitude, not one’s ethos or musical preferences, signifies membership. For all of Erickson’s naïveté regarding Mellencamp and Springsteen, he gets this one right. Punk rock was

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<sup>59</sup> Chuck Berry was interviewed by *Jet Lag Magazine* in 1980. The interviewer asked the rock legend to review a series of punk singles. Upon hearing The Clash, The Sex Pistols, and The Ramones for the first time, he accuses them of plagiarizing music he wrote twenty years earlier: “You say this is new? I've heard this stuff plenty of times. I can't understand the big fuss” (Hill “Chuck Berry Reviews”). Moreover, noted American recording engineer Steve Albini had the following to say about the first time he heard The Ramones: “I recognized that they were trying to make this sort of bubblegum pop music but it sounded so...inept” (King, *Looking For A Thrill*).

more about the uniform than the music, and eventually lapsed into self-parody just like rock and roll did.<sup>60</sup>

Not coincidentally, Vikar discovers punk rock shortly after winning an editing prize at Cannes for rescuing a seemingly unsalvageable film called *Your Pale Blue Eyes* (an award category for editing at Cannes does not actually exist, but is invented that year to accommodate his mad genius). Punk is the musical realization of Vikar's aesthetic in film, "something for which – he realizes in retrospect – he's been listening for years" (153). *Zeroville* claims that something new was afoot in Hollywood and in music and in America in the 1970s. Punk was the new rock and roll (which later morphed into the more danceable New Wave) just as Hollywood had become the New Hollywood. Vikar is unable to resist the primal rawness of punk rock, the same primal rawness he displays with his innovative editing techniques. The punk music he likes is an extension of his personality in the same way Erickson believes Mellencamp's or Springsteen's songs are extensions of their personalities (in the same way that Erickson's admiration of them is an extension of *his* personality).

Both Erickson and Vikar share a solemn reverence for music (and film), and believe in its healing power. Indeed, Vikar needs it. He is haunted by nightmares of his strictly religious and abusive father – he utters "oh mother" instead of "Oh God" throughout the entire novel – which music helps him temporarily forget. In Erickson's work, rock and roll only offers a *temporary* freedom from the problem of self, perhaps because there is a problem inherent to total freedom as well. As Baudrillard warns "[o]nce you are liberated, you are forced to ask yourself who you are" (48). Rather than

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<sup>60</sup> Perhaps Erickson has been listening to Drunk Horse, an obscure Oakland band who once released a song called "Legions" in which they sang "it's not cool to conform/but check out this uniform/yeah now you're unique/welcome to The Uniques".

trouble himself with the question of who he really is (Vikar is not his real name), Vikar turns to the therapeutic power of music. For an individual who does not keep very good company for himself and shows a startling capacity for sudden violence – he smashes a tray of food over a hapless hippie’s skull on the second page of the novel – such freedom, even if only temporary, is crucial to his very survival. Over the course of the novel, his propensity for violence slowly wanes, having found paradoxical solace in the violence of mosh-pits. Punk, for Vikar, is a pacifier. He buys punk albums for his adopted daughter Zazi, to her delight. “When you hear a really great record or see a really great movie,” she tells him, “you feel alive in a way you didn’t before” (*Zeroville* 267). Zazi’s words are remarkably similar to Jon Landau’s. They both describe the feeling of being alive in terms of being reborn. Rock and roll is supposed to make one feel reborn and alive. That is its promise. Despite Vikar’s eventual disappointment with the punk scene, he never stops loving the sound of the music. He betrays no parental displeasure or concern later in the book when Zazi joins a punk band, because music gives her life a particular meaning too.<sup>61</sup>

In *Rubicon Beach*, Cale makes a clandestine trip to a hardware store in Chinatown to illegally buy a transistor radio. He is disobeying a local ordinance that bans all music. He eventually finds one, but rather than be furtive about it, he plays the thing at full volume when he gets home (25). A police officer pays him a visit and thanks him for not breaking the local ordinance. “If I knew you had a radio,” warns the cop while staring at the radio, “I’d have to take you in” (*Rubicon Beach* 17). This is meant to imply the persistence of music, its power, its role as instigator. Even the dour inspector likes rock

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<sup>61</sup> The band is winkingly christened The Rubicons, and the title of their debut EP is *Tick Tock* (305).

and roll. He lets Cale keep his radio. Elsewhere in Erickson, music is a source of comfort. In *Our Ecstatic Days*, Kristen sings “an obscure pop song of the early Twenty-First Century” aloud in order to console herself after her son vanishes (1). Most recently, Erickson has remarked upon the rock star quality to Barack Obama and the rock concert energy of his election, and wonders in *These Dreams of You* if it would actually bring the country closer. He employs a musical metaphor:

This was the great test, whether there was a song the country could sing in common. Instead, more than ever it's a country of many songs all of them noisy, without a single melody that anybody cares about carrying. The country is a babel of not just melodies that no one shares but memory; and as Babel fractured language into thousands, the country is the sum total of a memory fractured into millions, not one of them a memory of a country as it has actually existed. (*These Dreams of You* 300)

Erickson equates the value of harmony with the value of understanding and compassion amongst citizens. His conclusion here is desolate but still professes belief in the power of music.

### **Conclusion**

Erickson has compared the rock star quality of Obama to that of JFK – “whose persona through the medium of television and incandescent martyrdom became ours to invent” (*American Nomad* 211). Like a rock star, JFK is frozen in time, not judged by the sum of what he did but by the things he might have done. Such idolization can be dangerous, Erickson warns, in the way that it gives mythic dimensions to living individuals like Obama or Springsteen – a mythology bound to disappoint unless death

comes to render the individual's potential forever unblemished. His only criticism of Springsteen, if indeed it can be called a criticism, comes when Erickson describes his audience's relationship with him as "uncomfortably messianic" (*American Nomad* 64). In doing so, Erickson expresses his awareness of the danger of attaching mythical qualities to a person, even if that person is Bruce Springsteen. Any misstep (like the firing of the E-Street band, something Springsteen was well within his rights to do, or the song "Real Man" which is objectively atrocious) is magnified.

The same goes for Obama. After the catharsis of his first election, but before the Babel of American voices began clamoring for attention, Erickson contends that there was vacuum of silence, a kind of national hangover that demonstrated the magnitude of disappointment there would eventually be in Obama. Nobody could live up to that kind of hype. His inability to keep the belief going, to keep the music going,

is as much about our failure to hear the music anymore – and how the moment no longer seems to allow for it – as it is about anyone's failure to make it. The music exists not just by virtue of the singing but also the listening. One guy isn't going to transform what won't be transformed. One guy isn't going to unify or reconcile what isn't willing to be unified or reconciled, especially when people are openly rooting for his failure before he's walked in the front door. If my friends to the left of me think Obama is a corporate sell-out, while the same corporations despise him and my relatives to the right of me thinks he's Leon Trotsky, is he completely responsible for that disconnect? At what point are the rest of us complicit?

("Every Moment I'm Awake")

For both Obama and Springsteen, the mythic dimension of their personalities has the

danger of rendering them fatally ineffective. Springsteen can never reconcile his image with eating caviar backstage, yet he does anyway. Obama could never live up to the hype of his election, yet he will go on to insist that he did. Neither individual is free to follow his spirits in the way Jefferson would have intended because any deviation from their now-cemented mythology would be considered betrayal.

For Erickson, rock and roll is about both music and identity. He rarely analyzes songs as entities unto themselves. They are always the extension or products of an identity – whether artificial or real. He admits that he has always been “overserious” (“Soul Survivor” n.pag.), so it is unsurprising that he sees some larger meaning in rock and roll, but he also *needs* to believe that art has larger meaning because he is an artist. He does not want to view his own contributions to American literature as mere entertainment – his work means something more to him. He believes in the power of ideas and words because he has to – words are his trade.<sup>62</sup> He worries about the identities of his favourite musicians as much as he cares about their music because the assertion of identity means a lot to him. Erickson experienced such growing futility with his own creative expression: before he was finally published at age thirty-five that writing had come to feel “more like an assertion of identity than an act of will” (“Soul Survivor” n.pag.). Erickson’s favourite artists are often American: Patti Smith (whose words form an epigraph to *American Nomad*, “I’m an American artist, I have no guilt”), Bob Dylan, Frank Sinatra, Bruce Springsteen, Kurt Cobain, John Mellencamp, Iggy Pop, but he is not entirely oblivious to the world outside America’s borders – he also loves David Bowie (whose mid-Seventies exploits with Iggy Pop in Berlin comprise the middle section of

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<sup>62</sup> Here’s a brief exchange concerning a minor scuffle from *These Dreams of You* which demonstrates Erickson’s bias: “‘Shots weren’t fired?’ she says. ‘Knives weren’t drawn?’ ‘Oh, worse,’ Jim answers, ‘words were spoken’” (209, italics Erickson’s)

*These Dreams of You*) and he calls Van Morrison his “favorite musician of all time” (*Leap Year* 13). Music often signals great shifts in the narratives of Erickson’s novels, shifts either in the fortunes of his characters or linear shifts in the story itself.

But his chief preoccupation is with the way rock and roll asserts identity. He is drawn to charismatic figures like Springsteen and Mellencamp, larger-than-life characters who “[illuminate] the secret fantasies of popular culture or consciousness (Spinks 224), because “just as it is required of Americans to dream ridiculously, it is subsequently required that they succeed or fail ridiculously too” (*American Nomad* 229). He is interested in the ridiculous successes and failures of American artists, and whether they keep the promises they make through their music. In this hyperspecific context, rock and roll is an American thing. As is the case with all of Erickson’s thematic preoccupations, rock and roll manifests itself in the contours and form of his work. In a corpus that consistently disrupts the myths of America, its dreams and the desires of its dreamers, rock and roll in Erickson’s work occasionally delivers on its promise of transcendence, which is why he writes about it with such reverence. It is a medium through which one can assert identity. It offers a break from the forlorn ordeals and false ideals of American existence. It offers the things that America promises but cannot deliver.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion: Leaving America

*Just because you love something doesn't mean it loves you back.*

– Monty in *Zeroville*, explaining the movies to Vikar (but also Erickson talking about America)

Steve Erickson is drawn toward that which is both tangible and symbolic (the American highway, rock and roll) as well as that which is purely cerebral (dreams and paradoxes). In this project, chapters that demonstrate how Erickson examines the highway and rock and roll in order to disrupt their most potent myths (even while grudgingly embracing their enduring appeal) bookend chapters on thornier issues more central to Erickson's work: the dream and the paradox of America. Chapter Three attempts to make connections between Erickson's personal history and his approach toward America – a worrying approach which emphasizes the private – while Chapter Four investigates the contradictions in both Erickson<sup>63</sup> and his country. Throughout this project I tried to draw attention the many connections between Erickson's discrete works, in order to emphasize his recurring thematic preoccupations.

To date Erickson has published nine novels and two “non-fiction” books of election coverage.<sup>64</sup> His greatest novels – *Rubicon Beach*, *Tours of the Black Clock*, *Arc d'X*, and *The Sea Came in at Midnight* – each deserve book-length studies of their own, and there are many other themes and issues at play in his work that I was unable to

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<sup>63</sup> Erickson is decidedly not immune to contradiction. He judges the American Dream in concrete terms because the dream promises material rewards, but his fictional America is described in oneiric, surreal imagery. He embraces highway iconography while attempting to undercut it. As Chapter Four demonstrates, he points out the contradictions in America while often ignoring the contradictions in himself.

<sup>64</sup> It is tempting to compare these works to the work of Hunter S. Thompson, as they are ostensibly political works peppered with personal anecdotes, except that the spirit of Erickson's books is so dissimilar to Thompson's, it would be a disservice to both writers. Unlike Thompson, Erickson demonstrates a kind of solemn reverence for America (and Americans in general, whom he meets on the road), he is less self-congratulatory and self-mythologizing, and he is much better behaved in terms of substance use.



unpack or address. For example, Erickson, like his hero Faulkner, believes that the past is not really past and that “a dream is a memory of the future” (*The Sea Came in at Midnight* 227). His notion of time being simultaneously cyclical and linear has deep philosophical and metaphorical implications that space did not permit me to explore. Erickson’s Los Angeles certainly deserves an essay of its own relating to psycho-geography, memory, land use, and the nature of citizenry. I began one such paper but had to leave it unfinished due to space constraints. In short, Erickson frequently asks the question, when does a city become one’s own? Is a city *ever* one’s own? There is a scene in *Zeroville* in which Vikar, a resident of Los Angeles, watches *Manhattan* and is baffled by the idea that a city could feel like it belongs to someone.<sup>65</sup> There are many scenes like this in Erickson’s corpus, and they raise important questions about the notion of belonging in his work, which is surely related to his conviction that he is an American outsider. Two other, more disturbing recurring themes in Erickson are missing children (either through abduction or premature death) and rape.<sup>66</sup> These themes are certainly worth exploring, particularly given how many of Erickson’s violent characters equate possession with love. There is also the troubling trend of Erickson’s female characters, many of whom are catalytic but often silent, quasi-mythical martyrs, such as Catherine in *Rubicon Beach*, both Sally Hemings and Mona in *Arc d’X*, and Dotty in *Zeroville*. There is so much to explore and unpack here, but, alas, space did not allow for it. I had to go with the chapters that most strongly demonstrated my argument.

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<sup>65</sup> “New York was his town, and it always would be” (Allen, *Manhattan*).

<sup>66</sup> Children go missing in *Days Between Stations*, *Rubicon Beach*, *Tours of the Black Clock*, *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, *Our Ecstatic Days*, *Zeroville*, and *These Dreams of You*, and rape occurs in *Days Between Stations*, *Tours of the Black Clock*, *Leap Year*, *Arc d’X*, and *The Sea Came in at Midnight*.

While criticism of Erickson would certainly benefit from a book-specific approach, my focus on his overarching themes precluded the possibility of spending too much time on a single work. Moreover, jumping from novel to non-fiction work and back again would be more jarring in a study of an author whose novels don't share characters, landscapes, and thematic arcs. In a study of Erickson, I hope, such an approach is appropriate and even inevitable. The purpose of this project was to explore and explain the ways in which Erickson's overriding obsession with America manifests itself in his prose and in his approach to narrative. There was a strategic reasoning behind this: while Erickson's two most recent novels should not be described as less ambitious than previous works, they are decidedly narrower in scope than staggering early career opuses like *Tours of the Black Clock* or *Arc d'X*. Limiting *Zeroville* to the specific milieu of post-Sixties Hollywood and setting *These Dreams of You* chiefly in Europe, Erickson may be indicating a readiness to leave his Big Theme behind and begin exploring other pockets of the globe or smaller pockets of America without the grand sweeping interpolations on America his fans have come to expect.

Erickson no longer seems heartbroken that his country doesn't love him back, and he faces its contradictions not through a distorting veil of despondency, but with clarity and resolve. The fundamental psychological condition of Erickson's novels is still powerlessness, but he seems to have made peace with the inherent and arbitrary cruelty of American life in his more recent work. Vikar's surrender to the anarchic forces of his own muse in *Zeroville* results in the revolutionary film editing techniques that bring him fame but no personal satisfaction. He ultimately finds meaning and happiness in caring for his daughter, Zazi. Similarly, the closing pages of *These Dreams of You* see the

Nordhoc's house finally repossessed by the bank, but hope and optimism remain as they camp out in the car their elderly neighbor claimed was hers so the bank wouldn't take it, and the defiant spirit that runs through all of Erickson's work finds expression once again. Zan Nordhoc thanks the old woman for saving his car from the repo men, and she waves him off. "Fuck them," she announces (304). These two recent works suggest that Erickson may be mellowing with age, no longer agonizing over America and finally accepting it, or they might just be anomalies, like his long lost Sixties, in a longer tradition of adversity and burden. Whatever intentions Erickson may have for future works, this project was conceived with the modest aim of following his thematic fixations over the course of his oeuvre to date with both the Dream and promise/paradox of America in mind, attending to the manifestation of these worries in his metaphorization of highways, dreamscapes and rock and roll. To that end, I hope I have succeeded.

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